

Variazioni danzate e cantate su 'Il gabbiano' di Čechov: Roman Vlad and the Challenge of Contemporary Music Theatre

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PRELIMINARY REMARKS: SOURCES AND METHOD

On 5 September 1968, the Teatro dei Rinnovati in Siena hosted the *première* of Roman Vlad's latest work, *Variazioni danzate e cantate su 'Il gabbiano' di Čechov* (*Danced and Sung Variations on Chekhov's 'The Seagull'*; hereafter *Variazioni danzate e cantate*). The event was part of the 25th Settimana Musicale Senese (Siena Music Week), organized by the Accademia Musicale Chigiana, and boasted an exceptional cast conducted by Bruno Rigacci. From the orchestra pit, the soprano Lucia Vinardi and the young baritone Giancarlo Montanaro lent their voices to all the characters on stage. Here, four internationally renowned dancers stood out as soloists: Yvette Chauviré, Mylorad Miskovitch, Amedeo Amodio, and Carla Fracci.¹ Working in collaboration with the stage director Beppe Menegatti and the choreographer Loris Gai, the composer created a 'musical reading'² of Chekhov's *The Seagull* based on the interplay of dancing and singing in a multimedia setting.

According to Vlad, the project was inspired by the idea of creating 'a kind of free variation on Chekhov's work using instrumental music, singing, dance and acting'.³ After the *première* this statement was widely recalled in many positive reviews in national newspapers, underpinning as this work was an interesting 'attempt at a synthesis of experiences and language techniques',⁴ and as an exem-

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plary variation on ‘the world of experiences of a man of the twentieth century’.⁵ In addition to the composer and the director, critics presented *Variazioni danzate e cantate* as an atypical ballet, or a multimedia play in which all verbal, instrumental, and gestural elements are equal parts of a complex system. The relationship between the different media was indeed reevaluated from a dual perspective: on one hand, it drew on Vlad’s almost thirty years of experience in composing theatrical music and ballet; on the other, it seemed also to return to the operatic tradition, focusing the creative process on a *libretto* based on Chekhov’s play. The aim of this article is to explore this transitional moment, starting from the genesis of the work to evaluate the impact of Vlad’s research for a new balance into the ambiguous relationship between music, words, and dance on the composer’s career and on the contemporary cultural context.

However, to focus on the genesis of *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, this study draws on an extensive body of archival documents: letters, handwritten notes with the dramaturgical plan, the two handwritten versions of the *libretto*, a sketchbook containing a continuity draft of the work, a sketch with twelve-tone permutations, and 256 newspaper excerpts with performance reviews preserved in the Roman Vlad Collection at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice. Furthermore, a consistent amount of iconographic documentation – especially photographs – can be found in the archives of the theatres where the work was revived with the same cast in subsequent years, such as the Teatro dell’Opera of Rome and Teatro La Fenice in Venice. Unfortunately, there is no notated document about the choreography and no complete videotape of the whole performance. The audiovisual testimony consists of only a few short excerpts of the Venetian performance in 1969 included in the documentary film *La danza nel cuore* (*Dance in the heart*) from the series *Incontri* by Gastone Favero.⁶

This critical situation concerning archival sources is very common to researchers who specialize in dance and dance music studies.⁷ Despite their fragmentary nature, these photographs and video excerpts can be considered, as claimed by Myriam Van Imschoot, an extension of the dancer body archiving system because ‘this body is never “pure” flesh but is always already extending into an elaborate circuitry of technologies of all sorts’.⁸ At the same time, however, the available dance sources must be examined critically, since dancers’ body archives – even in their ‘extended’ forms – are far from neutral. Instead, they reflect both conscious and unconscious biases arising from performers’ own rhetorical narratives as well as from the social and cultural contexts surrounding them. Nevertheless, even if these sources are surely not enough for a complete reconstruction of the whole performance, they permit us to assess the scenic and choreographic elements. Studying the genesis of a work such as *Variazioni danzate e cantate* requires analysing both the individual textual layers and, above all, how they intersect. The analysis of sources, which in this case does not include any choreographic score,

must therefore seek out traces and convergences between music, choreography, and set design.

VLAD'S MUSIC THEATRE DURING THE 1950S AND 1960S

Upon receiving the commission to compose a new work for the 25th Settimana Musicale Senese, Vlad – then approaching his fifties – had already established himself as a pre-eminent figure in the Italian cultural landscape. His name was familiar to both professionals and the general public, who knew him as a modernist composer, a tireless critic and musicologist, deeply engaged in cultural management and in the dissemination of twentieth-century music. Vlad's compositional activity during those decades went hand in hand with his other work commitments, all of which were considered part of a unitary artistic project. As the composer himself claimed in his auto-analysis in the 1990s, his poetics can be summarized as

[...] a slogan that corresponds to the title of a book [he] published in 1958: *Modernità e tradizione* [*Modernity and Tradition*]. Tradition that must be constantly innovated so as not to dry up. Modernity that must always be rooted in tradition so as not to dissipate into nothingness. [Vlad] ha[d] always tried to avoid ideologies and opposing extremes, shunning both attitudes marked by reactionary traditionalism and unrealistic avant-gardism and the search for 'the new for the sake of the new'.⁹

These two terms – modernity and tradition – recurred very often in the composer's discourse about his activities, representing two milestones of his artistic and personal research.

While his early works from the 1940s were characterized by a strong attachment to the piano and appeared to be 'fairly academic',¹⁰ the composer gradually shifted his attention to timbre research and the development of a solid, yet highly personal, twelve-tone grammar. Rejecting the radical positions of the 'ultra-dodecaphonic'¹¹ composers, Vlad sought a dialectical synthesis between form and content, aspiring to find his own autonomy outside the opposition between the assiduous attendees of the Darmstadt International Summer Courses for New Music and more conservative composers. However, the full appropriation of a compositional method that he later defined as 'composing dodecaphonic music as if dodecaphony did not exist'¹² was the result of an experimental journey, reaching a crucial turning point in the 1950s and 1960s. The experimentalism of this period centred on two main concerns: the adoption of a technique of continuous variation and the development of an intertextual relationship with works from the European musical tradition.

When Vlad received the invitation from the Accademia Musicale Chigiana, he already had almost twenty years of experience in the theatre, during which

he had been involved in both ballet and the composition of incidental music for spoken theatre. Between 1943 and 1962, the composer had written the music for four ballets – three of which were for the choreographer Aurel Milloss – and numerous scores for stage music, specifically composed to accompany productions by directors such as Orazio Costa. In addition to these, he composed operas for concert performance, radio, and television, including *Storia di una mamma* (*A Story of a Mother*), *Il dottore di vetro* (*The Glass Doctor*), and *Fantarca*, respectively. During the 1960s Vlad's interest toward the musical theatre and specifically the operatic genre increased, as demonstrated by letters to Eugenio Clausetti suggesting an operatic project based on *The Master and Margarita*.¹³ However, since the *generazione dell'Ottanta* (generation of the 1980s) began the theoretical discussion, the renewal of Italian musical theatre seemed to remain a hot topic even for younger composers. In the early post-war period, Alfredo Casella and Gian Francesco Malipiero attempted to identify a possible solution, first by turning to the expressive possibilities of dance and then by rethinking the *libretto* in 'a more traditional music-theatrical dimension, which did not renounce the action represented by means of sung words'.¹⁴ In the 1960s, the rethinking of the role and construction of the libretto reached its most radical expression:

The small textual component [...] consists of a series of multilingual fragments, of varying register and length, mostly devoid of specific semantic meaning and used instead, often in a negative sense, for their connotative and referential value: both as visual material (advertising slogans, newspaper headlines) and as 'sound gestures' entrusted to a speaker (mottos, proverbs, quotations, countdowns, reading of the order of arrival of a horse race or the stock market index).¹⁵

On this new basis, figures such as Domenico Guaccero and Franco Evangelisti attempted to create 'a form of dramaturgy within the Nuovo Teatro Musicale (New Music Theatre) that was centred not on a text to be set to music, but on an experimental project in which the various components (verbal, vocal, visual and gestural) were rethought in terms of their own construction and their relationships with each other'.¹⁶ In joining this debate, Vlad chose to take a more traditional approach, prioritizing the identification of a subject – and therefore a text – over the composition of the score.

FROM THE WRITTEN WORD TO THE SCENE: FIXING THE SCORE

Marco Fabbri had been asking me for some time to write a new work for the Siena week. In summer 1967, this project took shape in the form of a commission for a theatrical work which, together with Spontini's *Julie, ou le pot de fleurs*, was to be staged at the Teatro dei Rinnovati in Siena on 5 September 1968. To pay homage to Siena, I had initially thought of reconstructing a libretto from the repertoire of the Rozzi Academy. However, I could

not find any text that sparked my imagination. Given the difficulty of finding an operatic subject, Fabbri then thought of a ballet and put me in touch with Beppe Menegatti, who explained some of his ideas on the subject to me. Among these was the idea of composing a ballet based on the plot of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*.¹⁷

Choosing a subject such as *The Seagull* posed a dual challenge for the composer and director. First, staging a Chekhov play meant engaging with a rich theatrical tradition that had spread across Europe following the success of Stanislavski's 1898 direction. In Italy, where *The Seagull* and Chekhovian theatre had already been presented to the public in the 1910s through translations by Sergei Yastrebtsov and Ardengo Soffici,¹⁸ they maintained their popularity in the post-war period thanks to figures such as Giorgio Strehler and Luchino Visconti. Moreover, the choice of subject raised some dramaturgical issues: how to bring to the stage the Oneginism¹⁹ typical of the characters in the play; how to convey the characteristic centrifugal speech of Chekhov's dialogues²⁰ in a libretto; and, how to translate the metatheatrical references into a new performance context. Therefore, the idea of creating a musical reinterpretation of the play was far from obvious when the director proposed it to the composer. While Menegatti seemed confident about the project's feasibility, thanks in part to his experience recreating significant works from the history of European theatre as ballets, Vlad was rather hesitant.

This initial resistance was, however, soon overcome, and Vlad himself took charge of drafting the libretto. In contrast with the tradition inherited from nineteenth-century melodrama, the composer followed the aesthetic model of *Literaturoper* and reduced the play into its 'salient phrases',²¹ excerpting them directly from the text in its original language. In his long career 'one of Vlad's most intriguing interests lies in the sound of languages and words, particularly those with phonetic singularity (e.g. Japanese), and their musical application':²² setting in music a Russian text – a language that he currently spoke with some Ukrainian inflections – meant an interesting research challenge. Once he had completed the entire draft of the work, he translated it under pressure from the publisher who was not in favour of performing and publishing the work in Russian at a time when establishing contact beyond the Iron Curtain seemed increasingly unlikely. However, Vlad was left with the great regret of never having heard the opera 'in its original Russian version'.²³

The first step was therefore to isolate some significant textual fragments. These were then transliterated from Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, then corrected with the help of an unidentified translator, who was probably part of the circle of Russian artists living in Rome with whom the composer was in contact: Mascia.²⁴ Firstly, she attempted to integrate the transcription directly onto the papers provided by the composer but, soon realizing that 'it might not even be possible to delete, underline or correct all the mistakes above and between the lines',²⁵ she produced a second draft of the libretto in her own hand (FIG. 1). This was the

second version that Vlad adopted as a reference point for the composition of the *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, which gradually took shape in a single oblong sketchbook.

That notebook provides evidence of a complex compositional process, to which the composer returned at several stages; it reveals a working method focused on examining the relationship between the sound and verbal components. Most of its 76 pages consist of sketches in the form of a skeleton score (FIG. 2), where the composer seems to follow the flow of Chekhov's characters' dialogues as they were transcribed in the second version of the libretto. The text under the notes is usually transliterated into the Latin alphabet, sometimes directly in Cyrillic, and then accompanied by the Italian translation, clearly inserted in a different ink and at a later stage. The characteristics of the draft, the way it was written, and its graphic peculiarities denote the composer's great attention to the possible intersections between word and sound, demonstrating how this combination formed the basis of the entire creative process and, consequently, of the dramaturgical project, which later also included a choreographic component.

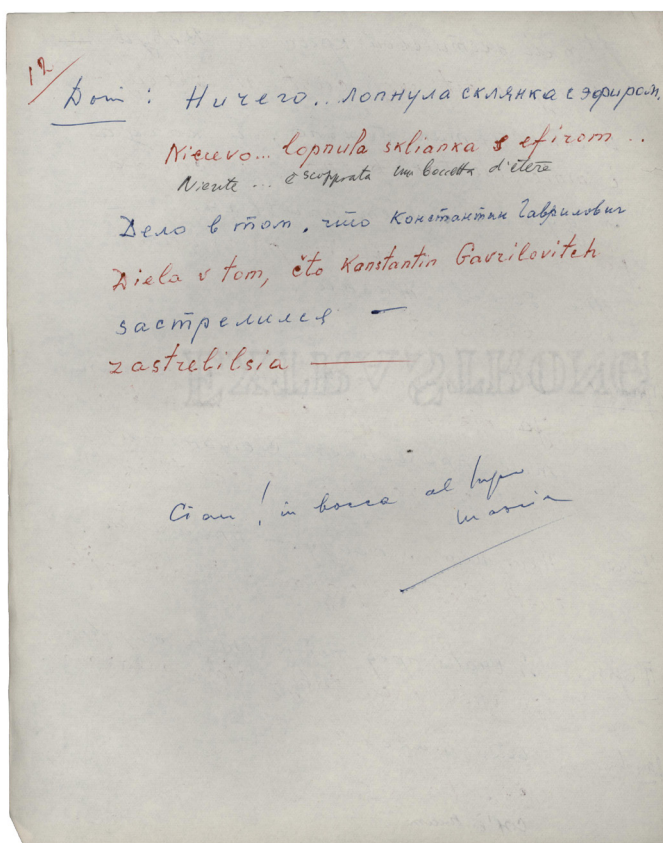


FIGURE 1. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, 1968, libretto, handwritten copy of the second version, fol. 12r. Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini (FGC), Vlad Collection.

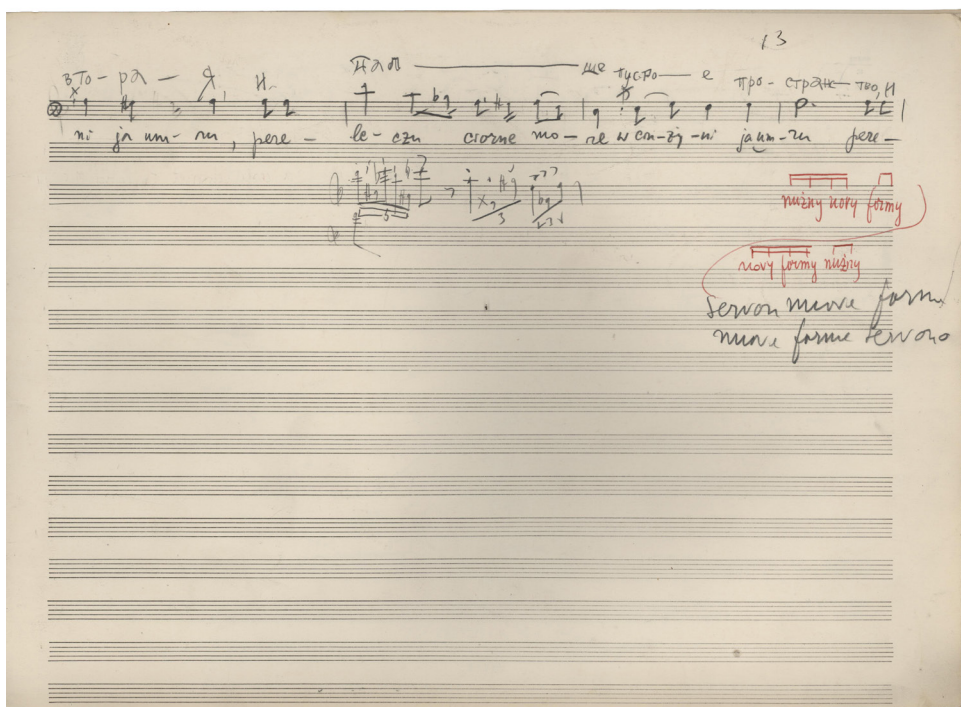


FIGURE 2. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, sketchbook, 1968, p. 13. FGC, Vlad Collection.

According to both composer and director, the interaction between words, music and choreography was essential to convey the disconnect between words and actions typical of Chekhov's dramaturgy. For Vlad, the heart of the drama lay in what he termed 'action [...] of an essentially interior nature',²⁶ which Menegatti summarized as a series of unresolved romantic attractions (FIG. 3). Dance and music would express these unspoken tensions, which could be sensed in the folds of the text. From a formal point of view, the score was conceived as an immense variation on themes derived from either Eastern European folk tradition or Russian piano literature. These themes were associated with each character in the drama through a leitmotif, which Boris Porena described as 'dancing skeletons [...] empty ghosts of Tchaikovsky waltzes, larvae of Ukrainian melodies found among childhood memories, Schönbergian lemurs scurrying among the ruins of a disused avant-garde'.²⁷ Their transformations corresponded to the inner tensions between the characters.

Once Vlad and Menegatti had reconstructed the libretto and orchestrated the score, however, they still had to resolve the main issues of Chekhovian dramaturgy. This involved the staging of the characters' inaction, in particular. They were unable to resolve their romantic tensions, either because they were affected by On-

A1 Inizia la danza per il gabbiano. I personaggi della storia sono tutti in scena eseguendo infernalmente la danza come se partecipassero a un ballo in famiglia.

EPISODIO 1

MASCIA è il primo personaggio che rimane solo in scena isolato dagli altri. Incontro fra **MASCIA** e **SIEMION**.

Tema di **MASCIA**:

a) **SIEMION** - "Perché vestite sempre di nero?"
MASCIA - "Porto il lutto della mia vita: sono infelice."

In questo primo episodio è da chiunque che esiste questa situazione:

SIEMION tende a **MASCIA** - *Makadina tende a Boris*
MASCIA tende a **KONSTANTIN** - *Nina tende a Boris*

2) **KONSTANTIN** ^{SORINA} tende a **NINA**
POLINA tende a **EUGHENI**
EUGHENI tende alle libertà. (fino a pag. 32)

A questo punto è da introdurre un episodio aneddotico (in aneddotico intendo dire un momento musicale in cui si possa presentare **ARKADINA** grande attrice, **NINA** che accenna brevemente la petita l'insufficiente di **ARKADINA**, l'incontro fra **NINA** e **BORIS**) che riassume gli altri personaggi dall'ingresso di **ARKADINA** alla chiusura dell'episodio che vede **MASCIA** nuovamente sola.

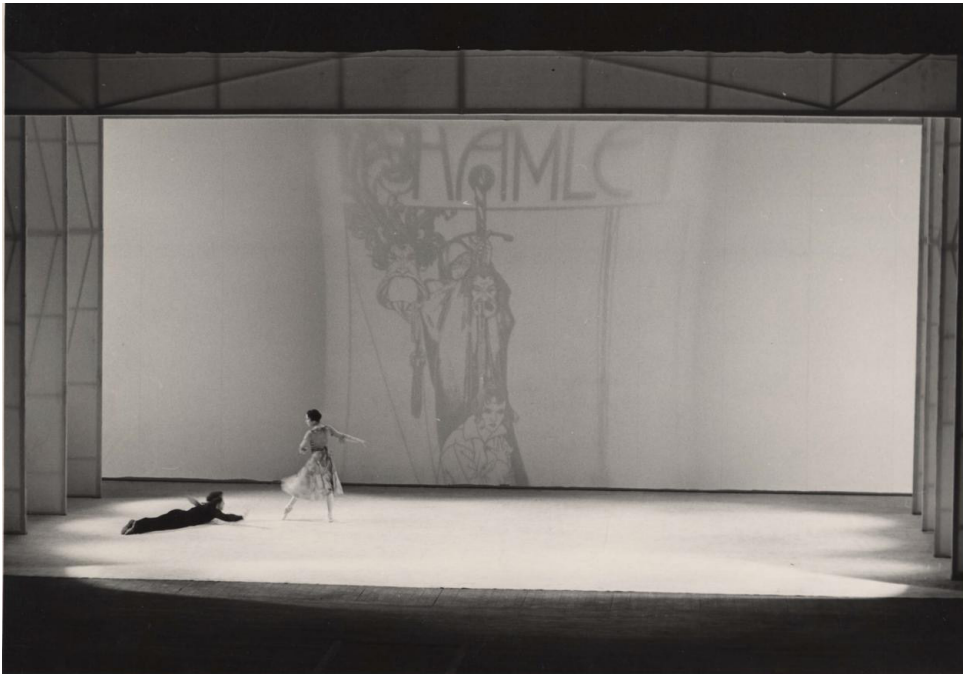
FIGURE 3. Beppe Menegatti, *5 danze per 'Il gabbiano'*, [1967–1968], handwritten notes, fol. 1r. FGC, Vlad Collection.

eginism or because they were unable to construct a real dialogue. The solution necessarily had to involve scenic and choreographic elements. Rather than opting for a realistic setting, as Visconti had done a few years earlier, the director created a neutral stage space without a backdrop or architectural structures. According to some pictures taken during performances that occurred years later, in theatres both in Venice and Rome, the only chromatic elements were a few props – such as a chair and the curtain –, dancers' costumes – which played on the contrast between black and white –, and Giorgio Cipriani's slide projections. The physicality of the dancers, emphasized by their soft clothing, was the only element on stage to attract the viewer's gaze. Meanwhile, the projected images served as a means of interpreting the various metatheatrical references contained in the piece (FIG. 4).

The choreography was entrusted entirely to Gai, who began working with the company in summer 1968, when the project had already taken on a definitive form. Faced with a narrative structure already established by the *libretto* and, consequently, a formal articulation of the score that had already been outlined, the choreographer had to adapt to the needs of the composer and director. Unlike in previous ballet compositions, it does not appear that the composer sought to contact the choreographer during the drafting phase or to discuss certain choreographic choices with him. The two certainly met in Siena, where the composer attended the rehearsals with the orchestra and dancers, but it is likely that Menegatti was more often in contact with Gai.

While this division of labour was based on a relationship of close trust between the director and choreographer, it ultimately exacerbated the inherent scarcity of written sources relating to dance. To reconstruct the choreography, its movements and the relationship between gesture, music and words within the *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, it will therefore be necessary to piece together heterogeneous documentary fragments, following their traces in stage photos, reviews and a short audiovisual excerpt. The resulting picture is inevitably fragmentary, but it is nevertheless sufficient to reflect on the aesthetics of this choreography through a case study.

FIGURE 4. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, photograph. Venezia, Archivio Storico del Teatro La Fenice.



WORDS, MUSIC, AND GESTURES IN NINA–TREPLIOV'S *PAS DE DEUX*

The Nina–Trepliov *pas de deux* from the second act appears to be an interesting case study to highlight the strategies adopted in constructing the relationship between the various media components. First, the number represents one of the fundamental turning points in the plot of the play: Nina and Trepliov are left alone and he, placing the corpse of the seagull he has killed at her feet, anticipates his own suicide, denouncing Nina's coldness and his disappointment at the failure of his theatrical play. Secondly, this *pas de deux* had a very strong symbolic significance, as it developed the 'ornithological allegory' based on the association between Nina, the seagull and Trepliov, which, according to Angelo Maria Ripellino,

involves the entire Trepliov–Nina–Trigorin triangle. Because right from the start, Nina sets the theme, stating that she is drawn to the lake like a seagull. And it is Trepliov who kills it. Trepliov foresees that he will one day kill himself in the same way. The Trepliov–seagull pairing is thus balanced by Nina's identification with the defenceless white bird. The difference is that Trepliov destroys himself, while Nina is destroyed by Trigorin [...].²⁸

Third, this number is one of the few that are fully recorded in Favero's documentary, which also includes: Trepliov's play from Act I (18:24–19:30); Flowers dance from Act II (19:31–20:46); *pas de deux* Nina–Trepliov from Act II (20:47–22:14); *pas de trois* Nina–Trepliov–Trigorin from Act II (22:15–22:52); *pas de deux* Nina–Trepliov from Act IV (22:53–24:09).²⁹ However, this is a documentary about Carla Fracci and, obviously, the director wanted to valorise the *étoile* in a coherent way with the marketing techniques engaged by Fracci herself to present her public image. In the end, the availability of the complete video of the whole number, even if it does not offer a neutral point of view about the work, makes it a useful source for the understanding of the link between words, music and gestures behind the work's aesthetic.

Vlad and Menegatti focused their attention on the image of the seagull, symbolizing Nina's freedom and, at the same time, Trepliov's imminent death. Rereading the passage to prepare the libretto, the composer reduced the entire dialogue to a single sentence:

Треплев	Я имел подлость убить сегодня эту чайку. Кладу у ваших ног. Скоро таким же образом я убью самого себя.
---------	--

Trepliov	Ho avuto la viltà di ammazzare questo gabbiano. Lo depongo ai vostri piedi. Presto allo stesso modo io stesso mi ucciderò.
----------	--

Therefore, both literary debates and the characters' intimate revelations were omitted, according to a selection criterion that, on the one hand, ultimately reinforced the repetitive and fundamentally non-communicative nature of the dialogue, while, on the other hand, responding to a principle of brevity and to specific aesthetic requirements. In this way, music and dance were entrusted with the task of revealing the inner tensions between the two protagonists, while the spoken text merely described the situation on stage: the symbolic killing of the bird that foreshadowed Trepliov's death.

The composer prepared a score that revolved around the opposition of the ensembles and themes relating to the two characters. Trepliov's vocal entry, which came in an octave below the last note sung by the soprano in the previous Flower dance, seemed to suggest not only musical harmony but also a harmony of feelings. Soon, however, the respective melodic profiles of the two performers lost all common features. While the baritone's vocal line revolved around continuous variations on a theme derived from a Ukrainian folk song,³⁰ the soprano's brief interventions were inserted into set class 4–1, whose interval content (4, 2, 3, 1) was also the basis of the entire monologue in the first act, 'I am drawn to the lake like a seagull'. The only unifying element of the number was the twelve-tone series entrusted to the strings (9, 11, 10, 8, 6, 7, 5, 3, 4, 2, 0, 1), whose repetitions – each time varied – marked the different sections of the *pas de deux*, until the return of the first permutation announced the imminent conclusion of the piece.

This contrast between Nina and Trepliov – his attraction to her, and her rejection of him – had to be transferred also into the choreographic plan of the work. Thematic, formal, and especially rhythmic choreomusical relations can interact using parallelism, counterpoint and return as tools to link dance, music, and meaning.³¹ In this *pas de deux*, the relationship between dance and music reflected and amplified the structural contrast between the characters, achieved through the identification of each character with specific instruments and musical themes. Indeed, while Trepliov's character is associated with the baritone part, Nina's movements unfold in parallel with the orchestra, which anticipates her gestures. Only when the wind instruments attack in b. 4 does the dancer break her initial torpor, advancing towards the proscenium and then crossing the stage from left to right on pointe, accompanying the movements of her lower limbs with an angular gesture of her arms that marks the triplet rhythm (21:07–21:16). And it is again in correspondence with the attack of the wind instruments at b. 7 that the dancer interrupts the repetition of these steps to insert new figures (21:17–21:27). In the end, the clusters played by the celesta signal a momentary rapprochement between the two performers, who in this case both respond, albeit with different gestures, to the same sound stimulus: Trepliov turns towards Nina from the ground (21:34), then rests on his knees to support his partner's promenade and finally lifts himself up to carry her aloft.

Gai further reinforced the contrast between the two characters with different choreographic languages. On the one hand, Fracci's movements were closer to an *aérien* style, while on the other, Amodio kept a lower centre of gravity. In this way, a symbolic link was created on stage between Nina, Trepliov and the image of the seagull: Fracci's elevation was thus associated with flight; conversely, Amodio's expressive language, which often uses the ground, seems functional in representing the dying bird. Moreover, the metaphorical value of this number was further underpinned using pantomimic gestures of the performer's arms, which recalled the wing motion of the seagull, and due to their repetition emphasized their symbolic significance. Although the word 'seagull' is only uttered once, it remains visually present in the *pas de deux* through this mimetic gesture. This was a technique that Gai already had experimented with Menegatti and Fracci, during the strict collaboration with the étoile, which was used to:

pursue a 'guiding gesture', that is, a distinctive and unmistakable gesture from which not only the complex set of gestures but also the character's psychology would unfold. [...] Once this guiding gesture had been developed, Carla Fracci allowed herself to be led by the choreographer in the search for relationships that would effectively synthesize gesture and function in the overall choreography.³²

Unfortunately, the recorded excerpts presented in the documentary aren't enough for a concrete evaluation on the extensive application of the 'guiding gesture' in the work. Moreover, the many reviews about the representation didn't pay any attention to the details of the choreography. On the one hand, this lack of attention to choreographic details was widespread in the Italian daily press, due to a broader unfamiliarity with dance that has been widely discussed in histories of Italian dance. On the other hand, many journalists were more attracted by the presence of Carla Fracci – who had come back from the US that year and had started a career as an independent performer, carefully building a specific narrative about herself in Italian media – than by the performance itself. Just a few articles went beyond a general reaction and can be useful for critical evaluation of the choreography. The other articles were generally positive, although some negative reviews criticised the authors for the excessive length of the work,³³ for the choice of a play by Chekov,³⁴ and for a cryptic, too modern language.³⁵ None of them, however, mentioned the use of a guiding gesture nor other technical aspects of the choreography, just the critic Vice underlined how 'the mechanism of the show may appear convoluted and bizarre: each character corresponds to a theme; the theme is "varied" following the same fate as the character; connecting scenes divide the action into four parts, and from each of them the character – and the theme – that will give rise to the next variation remains "isolated"'.³⁶ Another interesting aspect is how critics from different fields reacted in opposite ways to the performance. Observing newspaper clippings written by musicologists, especially

those more sensitive to contemporary aesthetics, such as Mario Messinis, the authors were satisfied with the whole work. On the contrary, authoritative critics on dance, such as Vittoria Ottolenghi³⁷ and Gino Tani,³⁸ were more sceptical about the result. These strong differences seem to suggest how the solution for an expressive multimedia system claimed by the composer was, despite all his efforts, not always balanced.

CONCLUSIONS

According to the reaction of critics, the analysis of audiovisual sources, and a study on the genesis of the work, in the dramaturgical project of *Variazioni danzate e cantate* the verbal component emerged as the focal point of the musical experience: it is not only the fulcrum from which the musical composition unfolds, but it also finds visual expression on stage through the choreography, which primarily elaborates on the symbolic implications of the text. The words, both sung by Vinardi and Montanaro and embodied by the dancers on stage, permeated the spectator's experience, acting as a link between the different media components.

For the composer, such marked logocentrism is consistent with his aesthetic vision of music, in which his quest for modernity is always connected with tradition and, above all, with a primary need for communicability. From this point of view, indeed, the idea of *The Seagull* as a subject – highly unusual in contemporary musical theatre, which had little interest in reinterpreting Chekhov's texts – took on a programmatic value, since Trepliov's parable could be read as the drama of the contemporary composer. The words of Chekhov's character – 'I am increasingly convinced that it is not new or old forms that matter, but what a man writes because everything flows freely in his soul' – were therefore Vlad's personal warning to contemporary musical theatre, which, by emptying words of meaning, had definitively given up on communicating with its audience. With his *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, the composer thus ended his almost thirty-year experience in ballet, returning, as his mentor Casella had done before him, to a renewed – but still logocentric – music theatre.

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FIGURE 5. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, Act II, ‘Passo a due Nina–Trepliov’, © 1969 Ricordi, Milan. Heliographic copy with performance annotations in an unidentified hand, pp. 62–68. FGC, Vlad Collection. (Figure continued on the following pages.)

63.

Fl
1
2

Ob
1
2

Cl
1
2

Fag
1
2

Cori
1
2

Celista

Soprano
что дами?
chea-ve-te?

Baritone
ног
piv-di,
да-ших ног
ai vostri pre-
кара - иу
di

Viol
1
2
3
4

Viola

VC

CB

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64

movendo un poco

Fl 1 2

Hr 1 2

Cl 1 2

Fag 1 2

Cello 1 2

Vcl 1 2

Vl I 1 2 3 4

Vl II 1 2 3 4

Vla 1 2

Vcl 1 2

Cb 1 2

Soprano

Baritone

Da- mu? chea ve-ri?

Ско-го Та- ным-нвоопа-дом я у- Presto al- lo stes- so mo- do i- o

arco pmt 3 4

arco pmt 3 4

arco pmt 3 4

arco pmt 3 4

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65

45

Fl 1 2

Ob 1 2

Cl 1 2

Bass 1 2

Cello

Soprano

Baritone

Violin 1 2

Viola

Cello

Double Bass

Lyrics:

что с вами? Chea-ve-te?

что с ва-ми? che a-ve-te?

что са-мо-го се-бя. кро-по та-ким-же об-ра-зом. Al-lo stes - so mo-

что са-мо-го се-бя. кро-по та-ким-же об-ра-зом. Al-lo stes - so mo-

46

Handwritten musical score for a symphony orchestra and vocal soloists. The score is written on multiple staves, including woodwinds (Flute, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon), brass (Cornet, Trombone, Trumpet), strings (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, Contrabasso), and vocal parts (Soprano, Baritone). The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and 4/4 time. The vocal parts have lyrics in Russian and Italian. The string parts include弓 (arco) and p.m. (pizzicato) markings.

Fl. 1, 2

Ob. 1, 2

Cl. 1, 2

Fag. 1, 2

Corn. 1, 2

Celista

Soprano

Baritono

VI I 1, 2, 3, 4

VI

VC

CB

Lyrics (Russian):

СОН Я-У-ДИО СЕ-БА
do mi uc-ci - de-za

Lyrics (Italian):

chea-ve-te?

Lyrics (Russian):

ЧТО С ВАМИ?

Lyrics (Italian):

chea-ve-te?

67

The musical score is written on a single page, numbered 67 in the top right corner. It features a variety of instruments and vocal parts, all in a handwritten style. The instruments include two Flutes (Fl.), two Oboes (Ob.), two Clarinets (Cl.), two Bassoons (Fag.), two Corni (Corn.), Celesta, Soprano, Baritone, and a string section consisting of Violins I and II (Vcl. I, Vcl. II), Viola (Vcl.), and Cello (Cb.). The vocal parts have lyrics written below them. The Celesta part has the instruction 'va ai timpani' (go to the timpani). The string section has the instruction 'levare le sordine' (remove the mutes). The Baritone part has lyrics in Italian: 'stes- so mo- do mi uc- ci- de-'. The Soprano part has a melodic line with a fermata and a final note marked with a double bar line and a repeat sign. The Flutes, Oboes, Clarinets, and Bassoons have melodic lines with various notes and rests. The Corni have a melodic line with a fermata. The Violins I and II have a melodic line with a fermata. The Viola and Cello have a melodic line with a fermata.

Fl. 1
Fl. 2
Ob. 1
Ob. 2
Cl. 1
Cl. 2
Fag. 1
Fag. 2
Corn. 1
Corn. 2
Celesta
Soprano
Baritone
Vcl. I
Vcl. II
Vcl.
Cb.

va ai timpani

stes- so mo- do mi uc- ci- de-

levare le sordine

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[illegible]

Notes

- 1 According to the program note printed for the *première*, Chauviré, Miskovitch, Fracci and Amodio performed the roles of Irina Arkàdina, Boris Trigorin, Nina e Konstantin, respectively. The *corps de ballet* included Filippo Morucci (Pëtr Sorin), Dino Lucchetta (Ilja Samaraev), Ria Teresa Legnani (Polina), Loredana Furno (Màscia), Mario Bini (Evgénij Dorn) and Loris Gai (choreographer and performer of Semën Medvèdenko).
- 2 'Lettura musicale'. Roman Vlad, *Note su 'Il gabbiano'*, typewritten program notes, [1968], fol. 1r. Venice, Fondazione Giorgio Cini (FGC), Roman Vlad Collection.
- 3 '[...] una specie di libera variazione sul lavoro di Čechov realizzato con i mezzi della musica strumentale, del canto, della danza e della recitazione'. Vlad, *Note su 'Il gabbiano'*, fol. 1r.
- 4 '[...] tentativo di una sintesi di esperienze e di tecniche di linguaggi'. Giuseppe Pugliese, 'Dittico teatrale tra antico e moderno', *Il Gazzettino*, Venezia, 6 September 1968. FGC, Vlad Collection, fasc. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, press clippings.
- 5 Cf. 'The *Seagull* is exemplary: it is a "variation" on "everything" (and by everything we mean the world of experiences of a man of the twentieth century, of that 'particular' man who is Roman Vlad): from Chekhov's text to dodecaphony, from *Sprechgesang* to lyric singing, from traditional dance (*pas à deux*) to expressive pantomime, from Schönberg to Puccini and perhaps Giordano, from Stravinsky to Pizzetti, from Berg to Hindemith, from Tchaikovsky to "harmonised" Ukrainian folk singing' ('*Il gabbiano* è esemplare: è una "variazione" su "tutto" (e per tutto si intende il mondo delle esperienze di un uomo del Novecento, di quell'uomo 'particolare' che è Roman Vlad): dal testo di Čechov alla dodecafonia, dallo *Sprechgesang* al canto spiegato, dalla danza tradizionale (i *pas à deux*) alla pantomima espressiva, da Schönberg a Puccini e magari a Giordano, da Stravinskij a Pizzetti, da Berg a Hindemith, da Ciaikovskij al canto popolare ucraino 'armonizzato'). Marcello Venturoli and Carlo Marinelli, 'La nuova antologia', in: *Rassegna di arte*, Roma, ottobre 1968, pp. 280–288.
- 6 The film was transmitted on public television Second Channel for the first time on 28 July 1969. An excerpt was published in RAI website at this link: <https://www.teche.rai.it/2021/05/carla-fracci-una-vita-a-passo-di-danza> (accessed 7 December 2025); the whole film is available in YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OOM_Jw6S-DLs&t=1103s (accessed 7 December 2025).
- 7 The lack of written sources and the sporadic use of notational systems to record dance movements have been widely discussed by dance scholars, who have referred to this issue as the rhetoric of the ephemeral. For an overview of different positions, see *Ricordanze. Memoria in movimento e coreografie della storia*, a cura di Susanne Franco e Martina Nordera, Novara: DeAgostini, 2008, especially the general introduction (pp. xvi–xxxv).
- 8 Myriam Van Imschoot, 'Rests in Piece. Partitions, notation et traces dans la danse', *Multitudes*, 11/21, 2005, pp. 107–116: 112.
- 9 '[...] sotto un'insegna che corrisponde al titolo di un libro che ho pubblicato nel 1958: *Modernità e tradizione*. La tradizione che per non inaridire deve incessantemente essere innovata. La modernità che deve essere sempre radicata nella tradizione per non disperdersi nel vuoto. Ho sempre cercato di evitare ideologie ed opposti estremismi rifuggendo sia da atteggiamenti improntati ad un reazionario tradizionalismo, sia velleitari avanguardismi e da ricerche del "nuovo per il nuovo"'. Roman Vlad, 'Autoanalisi', in: *Autoanalisi dei compositori italiani contemporanei*, a cura di Alberta Cataldi, Napoli: Flavio Pagano, 1998, pp. 43–47: 44.
- 10 Cf. 'From the early pieces, which were fairly academic, we gradually move towards greater complexity and freedom in the treatment of twelve-tone material' ('Dai primi pezzi, piuttosto didascalici, si procede via via verso una maggiore complessità e libertà nel trattamento del materiale dodecafonico'). Alessandro Marchiori, 'La "dodecafonia svernata" di Roman

- Vlad. Un excursus attraverso la sua produzione', in: *Musica come esperienza totale. Riflessioni e testimonianze su Roman Vlad*, a cura di Angela Carone, Venezia: Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 2021, pp. 75–93: 81.
- 11 The term originates from a handwritten note by Vlad, later deleted, in the typescript of *History of Dodecaphony*, where the composer criticised 'ultra-dodecaphonic' opponents, such as Pierre Boulez, who reproach Schönberg for not having been faithful to the data and immanent laws of "serial material" ('gli avversari ultradodecafonici, sul tipo di Pierre Boulez, che rimproverano a Schönberg di non essere stato fedele ai dati e alle leggi immanenti del "materiale seriale"'). Roman Vlad, *Elementi metafisici nella poetica dodecafonica*, page proof with handwritten notes, p. 26. FGC, Vlad Collection. Quoted in Francesco Fontanelli, 'Tra Croce e Adorno. Gli scritti di Roman Vlad nel tempo della ricostruzione (1945–50)', in: *Musica come esperienza totale*, pp. 3–32: 27.
 - 12 '[...] comporre musica dodecafonica come se la dodecafonica non esistesse'. Luca Villani, 'Intervista a Roman Vlad', *Il Fronimo*, 38/150, aprile 2010, pp. 7–17: 8.
 - 13 The correspondence relating to the *Variazioni danzate e cantate* in the Vlad Collection includes three letters exchanged between the composer and his publisher, dated between May 1968 and January 1969, in which Vlad explicitly expressed the idea of composing an opera based on Mikhail Bulgakov's novel. However, the project was never realized.
 - 14 '[...] una dimensione musico-teatrale più tradizionale, che non rinuncia[va] cioè all'azione rappresentata per mezzo di parole intonate'. Mila De Santis, 'Casella nel Ventennio fascista', in: *Italian Music During the Fascist Period*, ed. by Roberto Illiano, Turnhout: Brepols, 2004, pp. 371–400: 396.
 - 15 'L'esigua componente testuale [...] consta di una serie di tasselli plurilingui, di vario registro, di varia lunghezza, perlopiù svuotati di pregnanza semantica specifica e utilizzati piuttosto, non di rado in senso negativo, per il loro valore connotativo e referenziale: sia come materiale visivo (scritte pubblicitarie, titoli di giornale), sia come "gesto sonoro" affidato a uno speaker (motti, proverbi, citazioni, count down, lettura dell'ordine di arrivo di una corsa di cavalli o dell'indice di borsa)'. Mila De Santis, 'Le idee e le parole: orientamenti del testo verbale nel teatro musicale di avanguardia in Italia', in: *Teatro di avanguardia e composizione sperimentale per la scena in Italia: 1955–1970*, a cura di Gianmario Borio, Giordano Ferrari e Daniela Tortora, Venezia: Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 2017, pp. 27–58: 37–38.
 - 16 'Una drammaturgia impernata non tanto su un testo da musicare, quanto su un progetto sperimentale nel quale le diverse componenti (verbale, vocale, visiva, gestuale) sono ripensate per costruzione propria e per relazione con le altre'. Alessandro Mastropietro, *Nuovo Teatro Musicale fra Roma e Palermo, 1961–1973*, Lucca: LIM, 2020, p. 61.
 - 17 'Marco Fabbri da tempo mi chiedeva un nuovo lavoro per la settimana senese. Nell'estate 1967 questo progetto si concretò nella commissione di un'opera teatrale che, insieme alla riesumanda *Julie, ou le pot de fleurs* di Spontini, avrebbe dovuto costituire lo spettacolo lirico programmato al Teatro dei Rinnovati di Siena il 5 settembre 1968. Per rendere omaggio a Siena avevo pensato inizialmente di ricostruire un libretto del repertorio dell'Accademia dei Rozzi. Non trovai però nessun testo tale da sollecitare la mia fantasia. Vista la difficoltà di trovare un soggetto operistico, Fabbri pensò allora ad un balletto e mi mise in contatto con Beppe Menegatti il quale mi illustrò alcune sue idee in proposito. Tra queste c'era l'idea di comporre un balletto sulla trama de *Il gabbiano* di Anton Čechov'. Vlad, *Note su 'Il gabbiano'*, fol. 1r.
 - 18 See Giuseppina Larocca, 'Emigrazione e letteratura russa a Firenze: scritture e traduzioni', in: *Migrazioni ed esili nel Novecento: prospettive tra ispanistica e russistica*, a cura di Iris Karafillidis e Angela Moro, Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2022, pp. 68–87.
 - 19 This term was coined by Nikolay Brodsky to denote a particular state of mind typical of characters in Russian literature. This state of mind has its archetype in the figure of Eugene Onegin, 'whose characteristics are detachment from public life, spiritual fatigue, scepticism, continuous and sterile introspection, inability to act, social passivity' ('le cui caratteristiche sono l'estraneità dalla vita pubblica, stanchezza

- dello spirito, scetticismo, continua e sterile introspezione, incapacità di azione, passività sociale'). Elena Zherolomskaya, *L'amletismo nelle opere di Anton Čechov*, Roma: SINFUB, 2017, p. 38.
- 20 The definition of 'centrifugal joke', used with reference to Chekhov's theatrical technique of concealing inner feelings through language by introducing elements into dialogue that are apparently inconsistent with and deviant from the action, was proposed by Michele Colucci in 'Čechov', in: *Storia della civiltà letteraria russa* (vol. I), a cura di Michele Colucci e Riccardo Picchio, Torino: UTET, 1997, pp. 763–788: 785.
 - 21 'Frase salienti'. Vlad, *Note su 'Il gabbiano'*, fol. 1r.
 - 22 Laura Mazzagufò, 'Tre poesie di Montale by Roman Vlad: compositional techniques and text correspondences', *Archival Notes*, 4, 2019, pp. 17–29: 18.
 - 23 '[...] mai nella versione originale in lingua russa'. Roman Vlad, *Vivere la musica*, Torino: Einaudi, 2011, p. 73.
 - 24 The name comes from a signature at the end of fol. 12r of the second version of the libretto, in which, once the work was completed, she wrote: 'Good luck | Mascia'.
 - 25 Message from Mascia to Vlad, no date. FGC, Vlad Collection.
 - 26 'Azione [...] di natura essenzialmente interiore'. Vlad, *Note su 'Il gabbiano'*, fol. 1r.
 - 27 'Scheletri danzanti [...], vuoti fantasmi di valzer čajkovskijani, larve di melopee ucraine reperite tra i ricordi di infanzia, lemuri schönberghiani sguscianti tra le rovine di un'avanguardia in disuso'. Boris Porena, 'Per un nuovo balletto di Roman Vlad', in: Boris Porena, *Musica riflessa*, Cantalupo di Sabina: Istituto Internazionale di Musica Meta-Culturale, 1991, pp. 233–242; 234. First published as Boris Porena, 'Per un nuovo balletto di Roman Vlad', *Chigiana*, 5, 1968, pp. 295–304.
 - 28 'Coinvolge l'intero triangolo Trepliòv–Nina–Trigòrin. Perché già all'inizio Nina imposta il tema, affermando di essere attirata dal lago come un gabbiano. Ed è Trepliòv ad ucciderlo. E Trepliòv presagisce che in egual modo ucciderà un giorno sé stesso. Il binomio Trepliòv–gabbiano si fa dunque equilibrio con l'identità che immedesima Nina nell'inerte volatile bianco. La differenza è nel fatto che Trepliòv si distrugge da sé, mentre Nina è distrutta da Trigòrin [...]'. Angelo Maria Ripellino, 'Prefazione', in: Anton Pavlovic' Čechov, *Il Gabbiano*, Torino: Einaudi, 1970, pp. 2–11: 3.
 - 29 In this description and subsequent analysis, references to timing are based on the complete video available on YouTube, particularly the section from 17:56 to 24:09 dedicated to this performance.
 - 30 The composer stated that this theme was derived from the song *Buio è il giardino* [*The garden is dark*], which is sung again by the baritone in reference to an action involving Medvedenko at the beginning of Act IV; Roman Vlad, *Note su 'Il gabbiano'*, fol. 3r. A discussion of the musical themes used by Vlad and their derivation from well-known pieces of the popular repertoire was provided by Boris Porena in 'Per un nuovo balletto di Roman Vlad', pp. 233–242.
 - 31 See Stephanie Jordan, *Moving Music. Dialogues with Dance in Twentieth-Century Ballet*, London: Dance Book, 2000.
 - 32 '[...] cerca[va] un gesto-guida, cioè un gesto caratterizzato e inconfondibile, da cui dipana non soltanto il complesso dei gesti ma anche la psicologia del personaggio. [...] Sviluppato questo gesto-guida, Carla Fracci si fa condurre dal coreografo nella ricerca dei rapporti che rendano efficace la sintesi fra gesto e funzione nella coreografia generale.' Lorenzo Arruga, *Perché Carla Fracci*, Venezia–Padova: Blow-up, 1974, pp. 38–40.
 - 33 Cf. 'The perhaps excessive length detracted from the overall dynamics of the show' ('La forse eccessiva lunghezza ha nuociuto alla dinamica dello spettacolo'). Ru. Pro, 'Al San Carlo l'*Edipo re* con *Il gabbiano* e *La giara*', *Corriere di Napoli*, Napoli, 25 May 1970. FGC, Vlad Collection, fasc. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, press clippings.
 - 34 This position was shared by several conservative critics, such as Auledo: 'What Menegatti (who also influenced the choreographer Loris Gai) showed us in *The Seagull* lacked both meaning and coherence with Chekhov's work, which, moreover, because of the deliriously

inward nature of its characters, is completely inexpressible in forms other than those of the “word” (‘Quello che Menegatti (che ha preso la mano anche al coreografo Loris Gai) ci ha mostrato nel *Gabbiano* non aveva alcun senso e alcuna coerenza con l’opera di Cechov, che, del resto, per quella sua patina di farfeticamente interiore dei personaggi è del tutto inesprimibile in altre forme che non siano quelle della “parola”). Auledo, ‘Il Gabbiano dilettante’, *Lo specchio*, Roma, 19 April 1970. FGC, Vlad Collection, fasc. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, press clippings.

- 35 Cf. ‘This dancing drama is not always easy to follow as it unfolds, making it difficult to grasp its logic and clarity’ (‘questo dramma danzante non si lascia sempre seguire nel suo svolgimento, per cui sia possibile coglierne la logica e la chiarezza’). Alfredo Parente, ‘Leoncavallo, Roman Vlad e Casella: *Edipo re*, *Il gabbiano*, *La giara*, *Il Mattino*, Napoli, 24 May 1970. FGC, Vlad Collection, fasc. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, press clippings.
- 36 ‘[...] involuto, cervellotico, può apparire il meccanismo dello spettacolo: ad ogni personaggio corrisponde un tema; il tema viene “variato” seguendo la stessa sorte del personaggio; quadri di raccordo dividono la azione in quattro parti, e da ognuno di essi resta “isolato” il personaggio – e il tema – che darà vita alla variazione successiva’. Vice, ‘Dal *Gabbiano* di Čechov un balletto di Vlad’, *La Voce Repubblicana*, Roma, 7 April 1970. FGC, Vlad Collection, fasc. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, press clippings.
- 37 Cf. ‘The fragility of this Seagull lies in the imperfect relationship between dramaturgy and dance. Loris Gai’s choreography, elegant and

measured, fails to integrate with sufficient force into this experiment in total theatre. In short, dance – the very language chosen as the basis for the performance – ends up, perhaps because it is overwhelmed by the direction, being the most discontinuous and theatrically weakest element’ (‘La fragilità di questo *Gabbiano* sta nel rapporto, imperfetto, tra dramaturgia e danza. La coreografia di Loris Gai, di per sé elegante e misurata, non riesce a integrarsi con sufficiente potenza, in questo esperimento di teatro totale. insomma, la danza – e cioè proprio il linguaggio scelto come base per lo spettacolo – finisce, forse perché soverchiata dalla regia, con l’essere l’elemento più discontinuo e teatralmente più fiacco’). Vittoria Ottolenghi, ‘Un fragile *Gabbiano* per una grande Fracci’, *Paese Sera*, Roma, 7 April 1970. FGC, Vlad Collection, fasc. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, press clippings.

- 38 ‘Music, in fact, is what lives, admirably and alone, in this composite work: everything else, Verlaine would say, is literature, and bad literature at that, which demeans Chekhov’s masterpiece and diminishes both the future dance movements and, even worse, the attempts at episodic and negligible acting’ (‘La musica, infatti, è ciò che vive, egregiamente, e sola, di quest’opera composita: tutto il resto, direbbe Verlaine, è letteratura, e pessima letteratura, che avvilisce il capolavoro di Cechov e sminuisce sia i futuri passi di danza che, peggio ancora, i conati di una episodica e trascurabile recitazione’). Gino Tani, ‘Variazioni danzate del ‘Gabbiano’ e centenario del celebre ‘Coppélia’, *Momento Sera*, Roma, 7 April 1970. FGC, Vlad Collection, fasc. *Variazioni danzate e cantate*, press clippings.