

**UNABHÄNGIGE SONDERKOMMISSION  
BALLETTAKADEMIE  
(INDEPENDENT SPECIAL COMMISSION ON  
THE BALLET ACADEMY)**

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**PROGRESS REPORT  
of the  
INDEPENDENT SPECIAL COMMISSION ON THE BALLET  
ACADEMY**

## I.

Following a report in April 2019 by the weekly magazine *Falter* that revealed problems at the Ballet Academy of the Vienna State Opera, the then Federal Minister for the EU, Arts, Culture and the Media, Gernot Blümel, set up an “Independent Special Commission on the Ballet Academy” with the remit to investigate these grievances and develop measures to prevent any recurrence.

On 18 April 2019, this Special Commission met for its constituent session. It was chaired by the (then) President of the Constitutional Court, Brigitte Bierlein and was composed of the president of the “Österreichischer Kinderschutzpreis (Austrian Child Protection Award) MYKI” and former president of “die möwe” (a child protection organization) , Martina Fasslabend, as well as the Rector of the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna (“mdw”), Ulrike Sych.

In early June 2019, the President of the Constitutional Court, Brigitte Bierlein, resigned from the chair because she was taking office as Federal Chancellor of the Republic of Austria, and Susanne Reindl-Krauskopf, Head of the Department of Criminal Law and Criminology at the University of Vienna’s Faculty of Law, took over as chairperson. On 17 June 2019, the Special Commission met for the first time in its new composition.

The members of the Special Commission work in an honorary capacity and fulfil their function independently. They are not constrained by instructions and are bound to secrecy. The Special Commission has the following objectives:

- a. to discover – as far as possible – objective information on staff responsibilities and to evaluate organizational structures and/or processes independently and parallel to the investigations undertaken by the public prosecutor's office;
- b. to develop measures designed to prevent discrimination and abuse of power, and to ensure the elaboration of a modern curriculum for ballet training by experts in the field.

It should be noted that the Special Commission is neither an administrative authority nor a court of law, which is why an investigation of the facts can only succeed to the extent that the individuals and institutions concerned are willing to cooperate. From a legal point of view, in particular, there is no obligation for anyone to make a truthful statement to the Special Commission, nor does it have any official investigative powers. Hence, there is a clear delineation between the Commission's scope of duties and objectives and any simultaneous labour-law and criminal proceedings which can and must ensure that full information is procured.

In their activities, the members of the Special Commission are supported by experts from the field of child and adolescent psychiatry.

The Commission was asked to provide a progress report to Federal Chancellor Brigitte Bierlein in July 2019.

## II.

Apart from the above-mentioned constituent meeting on 18 April 2019, the Special Commission also met on 8 May 2019, 27 May 2019, 17 June 2019 and 8 July 2019. All meetings took place at its seat, the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna, Anton-von-Webern-Platz 1, 1030 Vienna.

After the constituent meeting, a so-called Clearing Unit was set up to assist affected individuals, i.e. (active and former) students of the Ballet Academy, parents, teachers and other persons. The Clearing Unit can be reached both by telephone (+43 664 841 43 06) and by e-mail ([office-clearing@mdw.ac.at](mailto:office-clearing@mdw.ac.at)). The Clearing Unit offers affected individuals meetings in a confidential atmosphere with experts from the field of child and adolescent psychiatry as well as psychologists. Contacts are arranged via the secretariat of the Clearing Unit. So far, eleven people have contacted the Unit. The Special Commission received anonymized reports about the contents of what was discussed.

In addition, a website has been set up for the general public to obtain information about the objectives and composition of the Special Commission. The website provides contact details for the Clearing Unit and for the Special Commission ([www.kommission-ballett.gv.at](http://www.kommission-ballett.gv.at)).

During the meetings of the Special Commission, interviews have been conducted with nine individuals who either fulfill or have fulfilled tasks and duties at the Ballet Academy of the Vienna State Opera or at the Bundesgymnasium und Bundesrealgymnasium Wien III Boerhaavegasse 15 (a secondary academic school). Since some of the individuals interviewed were assured of anonymity by the Special Commission at their own request, this report refrains from giving any names, since the organizational units concerned are so small that any names mentioned would allow conclusions as to the identity of the others. The Special Commission, wishing to use this opportunity to thank all individuals for their willingness to discuss the situation, has made it clear to all persons interviewed, that it will be unable to maintain their anonymity in case of administrative and judicial proceedings. Furthermore, all interviewees were asked to provide truthful information to the Commission, even if they were under no legal obligation to do so.

In addition to conducting the interviews, the Special Commission also procured and examined written documents, in particular on the organizational structure of the Ballet Academy of the Vienna State Opera, the Vienna State Opera GmbH and the Bundestheater-Holding GmbH (including group guidelines, especially compliance guidelines), on training at the Ballet Academy (e.g. curriculum, admission procedures for students and teachers, pedagogical guidelines, school regulations, house rules), on complaint management at the Ballet Academy and on the Academy's cooperation with the secondary academic school.

In terms of content, the investigations of the Special Commission initially focused on three issues raised by media reporting:

- Allegations of inappropriate educational methods (e.g. kicking, scratching, ankle kicking, intimidation, abuse of power)
- allegations of inappropriate handling of the ballet students' nutrition (body shaming, weight measurements, handling of eating disorders)
- Allegation of sexual assault by a teacher against a ballet student.

Since, according to the information available to the Special Commission, the latter accusation had already been brought to the public prosecutor's office in the course of a statement of the facts, the Commission's investigations focused on the following issues:

- appropriate teaching methods in state-of-the-art training to become a ballet dancer,
- combining and coordinating ballet training with general schooling,
- a modern quality management system appropriate to the training institution, in particular with regard to the selection of the teaching staff and students, as well as their training,
- ensuring child protection and children's rights, and
- a modern system of managing responsibilities, structures and processes at the Ballet Academy as a constituent body of the Vienna State Opera.

### **III.**

In the short period of its activity up to the time of the progress report, the Special Commission was not yet able to conduct all the interviews which it considers necessary and which had already been planned. Moreover, the Special Commission has so far been confronted with highly contradictory statements. For example, there have been equally vehement confirmations and denials that the handling of eating disorders and teaching methods had been inappropriate in the past or that there had been appropriate reactions to complaints. For this reason, the Commission is currently unable to unequivocally identify staff responsible for incidents from the past or to present final recommendations.

While some statements differed very much on individual questions, they do allow a preliminary assessment of the issues on which action is likely to be required:

### **Clear structures governing responsibilities, organizational and process management at the Ballet Academy**

Apparently there was and still is a lack of clear structures pertaining to responsibilities and the organizational setup of the Ballet Academy. Some of the people interviewed were unable to state who was taking which decisions, who was responsible for what and who their immediate superior was within the institution. Neither was it possible to obtain clear information about the process management with regard to complaints from parents or students. While the State Opera provided the Special Commission with abstract information in writing, actual practical implementation could not be verified.

Quite generally, the Special Commission has gained the impression that any structures that may have been defined by the Vienna State Opera have not been communicated to all staff working at the Ballet Academy or, at any rate, they have not been implemented to the extent necessary for day-to-day operation. According to the reports, the leadership and communication style of the Ballet Academy management lacks transparency and is non-participatory; this is also true of the cooperation partners (e.g. the secondary academic school).

### **Quality Management and Documentation at the Ballet Academy**

A professional training institution can only thrive if it evaluates and develops the quality of its training on a continuous basis. Apart from the evaluation of the training content, this especially includes quality-controlled teacher recruitment procedures. At the Ballet Academy there seems to be no clear selection procedure of this kind. Doubts have also been raised about the pedagogical suitability of some of the teachers.

Quality assurance, however, starts at the purely organizational level. A training institution must, for instance, be in a position to quickly retrieve all information on a student and his/her legal guardian in order to be constantly up-to-date about

the student's situation both in general and in the event of a crisis. This includes information about what training steps have been completed in the course of a school year, with what degree of success at every level, not only with regard to major exams, but also information about the student's state of health and other matters. Modern student administration systems offer assistance in this respect. The Ballet Academy seems to lack such a system. The people interviewed reported that there were only printouts kept in loose-leaf binders, and that these served merely as attendance registers.

### **Medical and therapeutic care for ballet students**

The medical and therapeutic care given to the ballet students appears highly insufficient. While there is a physician at the Ballet Academy as well as a school physician at the secondary academic school, this level of care seems neither adequate nor up to current standards in view of the extreme demands placed on young dancers. It is particularly striking that there was no continuous monitoring by nutritionists, physiotherapists or psychologists. Also, there seems to be no reliable contingency plan for medical incidents (e.g. eating disorders, training accidents).

### **Child Protection at the Ballet Academy**

The Ballet Academy also teaches children at a relatively young age (ten years and older). All of these children are exposed to an enormous strain, since they are obliged to attend training both at the Ballet Academy and at the secondary academic school. In addition, there are a very high number of rehearsals, performances, ballet competitions, and so on. Some children experience additional stress factors, for instance the fact that they live in a boarding school in Vienna far away from their parents and therefore do not automatically have a trusted person with whom to discuss personal problems in their native language.

Bodily changes during puberty also pose problems for many adolescents, given the physical demands of the dancing profession. Depending on the pedagogical approach, this may give rise to a pathological body image. To date, the Special Commission has not been able to identify an adequate child protection concept

geared to addressing the diverse and, sometimes, existential problems and challenges. Whether or not individual children get support seems to depend on whether they happen to find a trusted person within the Ballet Academy (or at least at the secondary academic school). This can give rise to dependencies on particular individuals and thereby encourages abuse of power.

### **Guarantee of a school-leaving certificate for leavers of the Ballet Academy**

The Special Commission explicitly welcomes the cooperation between the Ballet Academy and the secondary academic school, because the ballet students not only receive ballet training but also academic schooling and thus have the possibility to obtain a school-leaving certificate that qualifies them for university studies. Given the fact that the career of a dancer is short and involves a relatively high risk of injury, which can lead to the premature end of a career, the option of a second career outside the dancing profession is essential to secure the students' livelihood in later life. Also, students may simply develop other interests during the dance training, or their physical suitability for the profession may change and thus suggest or even require that they pursue another career. School education in addition to ballet training is therefore an essential element that must be maintained in order to keep all options open for ballet students, including the pursuit of further academic training.

Apart from some potential coordination problems between the Ballet Academy and the secondary academic school, which are earmarked for further investigations by the Special Commission, one problematic szenario is to be addressed already at this stage of the Special Commission's investigations, given the special importance of a secondary school-leaving certificate: according to the information available to the Special Commission, anyone leaving the Ballet Academy (e.g. because they fail to pass the end-of-year examination) is also obliged to leave the secondary academic school.

The students thus have the problem of suddenly having to find a place in another school, which is difficult and may jeopardise the completion of their secondary education.

A solution to this problem could reduce the pressure - which only adds to other strains - to be successful in ballet training at any rate in order to earn a school-leaving certificate.

#### **IV.**

Since the school holidays have now begun and the Ballet Academy is closed for the summer months - which means that some of the individuals holding information are currently abroad, including members of the management of the Ballet Academy who have already been invited for interviews - the Special Commission cannot continue its interviews at present. Interviews have therefore been postponed until autumn 2019 by mutual agreement.

Furthermore, the Special Commission intends to include in its autumn agenda the assessment of all those measures initiated by the State Opera since the problems became known, including measures that the State Opera intends to implement by the beginning of the new school year.

These time constraints notwithstanding, the Special Commission is striving to pursue and complete its work speedily.

The Clearing Unit is available as a contact point during the summer.

The next meeting of the Special Commission is scheduled for 9 September 2019.

. July 2019

Martina Fasslabend

Susanne Reindl-Krauskopf

Ulrike Sych