

## ***Canti prophani* by Sabin Pautza: innocent child's play illustrated through elaborate composition play**

CIPRIAN ION

“George Enescu” National University of Arts Iași  
ROMÂNIA\*

**Abstract:** Composer Sabin Pautza's creation, of a style diversity that is rare in the contemporary landscape of Romanian music, stands out through its effervescence and colourfulness, backed by the extraordinary mastery of writing techniques. The work we are referring to in this article, *Canti prophani*, is a vocal-symphonic suite written for a children's choir. The suite includes three contrasting miniatures (fast-slow-fast), united through their motif, *Maico, Maico...*, *Dalbe flori* and *Dimineața ziua bună*, representing a translation into music language of the main features of childhood games: repetitive action, rhythm, word play. In terms of language, the children's choir is assigned only the pure sonority of diatonic modes, while the orchestra overlays harmonic and polyphonic structures that are much more elaborate. The lay character of the lyrics, underlined in the suite's title, shifts the emphasis from the religious area to that of purity of heart and of sincere joy, the focus being on the high emotions around the feast of Christmas. This brief analytical examination will only highlight the main approaches to the sound material, looking at both archaic influences and at the modern composition techniques, as well as at the manner in which the two blend together. The actual thread that binds all three sections of this work, the image of the mother, occurs everywhere, as the mother is invoked throughout the length of the three parts.

**Keywords:** Sabin Pautza, *Canti prophani*, composition play.

### **1. Foreword**

Sabin Pautza is the composer that has crossed the most often the fine line that separates the so-called academic music from the popular, entertainment music. The natural manner in which he managed to do this, as well as his mastery of blending together styles and genres that were apparently antagonistic, make him an unpredictable creator, at the same time ludic and fascinating, impossible to fit in the generally-accepted classifications. Jazz, folklore, the serial dodecaphonic technique, modalism, tonality, the so-called “light music”, have all been approached in an effervescent playful manner, in pure form or in unusual style mixes, the foundation of the value of these eclectic creations being the absolute mastery of all composition techniques.

Sabin Pautza composes similar to a child who is given a large number of beautiful toys, which he uses all at once, and his play is so creative that it never

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\* andicip@yahoo.com

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ceases to amaze those who watch him. Maybe this is the reason why he has turned with fascination towards the sounds and the feelings of the age of innocence in two of his masterpieces, *Ofranda copiilor lumii* and *Canti prophani*, and the manner in which he did it shows emotional depth and synthesis capability. The composer did not stop at developing musical structures based on folklore and child's play, but instead he depicted the depth of an universe which is astonishing in its simplicity and innocence.

The two works mentioned above were written in approximately the same period (*Ofranda copiilor lumii – pentru cor triplu mixt* in 1973 and *Canti prophani – suita pentru cor de copii și orchestră* in 1974), the former being recognised by the country's highest scientific and cultural forum, the Romanian Academy, and awarded the *George Enescu* Prize. Although both works depict with sound the universe of childhood, focusing on play, the major difference between them consists in their degrees of difficulty. *Ofranda* requires an experienced ensemble, consisting of high-level professionals, while *Canti prophani* is written for child ensembles. Paradoxically, the way children would not be able to perform the former solely for technical reasons, the same way a professional choir would not be appropriate for the latter, for reasons of expression. Another difference is the relationship between the universal (represented by *Ofranda*) and the national (*Canti prophani*). *Ofranda* relies on melodic structures and on word play that cover a significant number of geographical areas, people and languages, highlighting the unity of play, innocence and children's folklore across the globe, while *Canti prophani* only refers to the Romanian geographic space and to the winter Holiday Season traditions that the children are involved in.

## 2. Style and compositions elements

*Canti Prophani* is characterised by an ostinato rhythm and motif repetition, a translation into musical language of the main features of childhood games: repetitive action, rhythm, word play. The suite includes three contrasting miniatures (fast-slow-fast), united through their motif: *Maico*, *Maico...*, *Dalbe flori* and *Dimineața ziua bună*. The sound and some of the word play refer, doubtlessly, to the winter Holiday Season, but it is worth mentioning that no line refers to the religious underpinnings of this period of the year. The lay character of the lyrics, underlined in the suite's title, shifts the emphasis from the religious area to that of purity of heart and of sincere joy, showcasing an intense experience of the holidays “separated” from the dogma. A few symbols evoked in the text remind the listener of the sacrality of carols (the basil, the mother, the mantle of stars), as do some orchestration elements – the presence of a quasi-improvisational moment in which the semantron and the bells take centre stage. Through the eyes of children, this is how the sacred

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is perceived: a few peripheral symbols, visual, olfactive or sonorous in nature, overpowered by the symbol of love and security – the image of the mother.

It is obvious that the foundation of the entire structure stands simple diatonic modes, with few elements (tetrachords and pentachords), characteristic of children's folklore and of Romanian traditional carols, a language enveloped, in a complementary manner, in various other forms of sound organisation. More to the point, the children's choir is assigned only the clean sonority of diatonic modes, while the orchestra ensemble overlays harmonic and polyphonic structures that are much more elaborate. We could state that this kind of harmonisation departs from the very clear canons of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but Sabin Pautza is precisely the kind of creator that cannot be pigeonholed by conventionalism. The result is therefore an overlay of languages that is seldom found in music history (the diatonic choir based on oligochords of diatonic modes and a chromatic orchestra with sounds that cover a wide range of styles). It becomes obvious that, in this context, the analysis of the vocal layer must be carried out separately, while the orchestral part must be examined both independently, and together with an observation of the areas of intersection or complementarity in relation to the sound of the children's choir. The fact that the voices were assigned the oligochordic diatonic modal language has two explanations: a practical one, as this makes rehearsing and performing easier, and a symbolic one, hinting at the purity and innocence of the young singers' universe.

### **2.1. The children's choir – diatonic language and polyphonic play**

If we dwell on the music written for the choir, we must mention the composer's vast experience, this time in performing the repertoire of this genre. Sabin Pautza used to be the conductor of the *Animosi* choir, a group that “for more than a decade used to be a school for choir singing, harmonious, expressive and absolutely professional” (Cozmei, 2010, p. 186). There are a few features that can be identified in all three parts of the work. First of all, the ambitus used is restricted, the phrases are short, repetitive, the rhythm parameter is simple and ostinato, all these features being characteristic for children's folklore. Secondly, to the musical play, the author adds word play, the result of a remarkable, humorous inventiveness, with a remarkable effect on both the performers and the audience. *Canti prophani* is, without a doubt, the type of work that is performed and listened to with delight, despite its complexity.

The main motifs of the three parts are related to each other in terms of mode, rhythm and melody.

Un - de mergi tu roas - că broas - că! le vei vei! le vei vei și ie - vei vei!

Dal - be flori Flori de mă - rul Dal - be - le flori, dal - be de mă - rul

Lin pe lin oș - ti - le vin Mai - co! Pe la ma - ma lui Că - lin Mai - co!

Di - mi - nea - ța zi - ua bu - nă! Da - li - a - na fa - tă dal - bă! Di - mi - nea - ța zi - ua bu - nă!

Fig. 1 Sabin Pautza, *Canti prophani*

The four phrases shown in the figure above represent the entire thematic material of the work. The first phrase belongs to the first part and is based on a major diatonic tetrachord. The next two belong to the second miniature (Dorian on *E* and, respectively, a minor diatonic pentachord), while the fourth represents the fundamental thematic structure of the last miniature, being constructed in the Ionian mode, on *A*. The use of these modes results in a contrasting palette of emotional states, and the composer is recognised for the masterful manner in which he creates sequences of antagonistic musical moments, without affecting the structural and emotional unity of the whole. The external miniatures, depicting the playfulness and the festive atmosphere of the Holiday Season, are assigned major modes, while the median miniature, more introspective, is based on minor modes.

One fascinating thing is the manner in which the author manages to depict the lack of precision, the ruckus, the apparent lack of decorum deriving from the cheerfulness of children's performance. We could say we are dealing with a depiction of disorder through very precise, calculated, super-organised composition devices. The most often used technique is that of imitation, taken to the level of a small-size canon, but there are other forms of superposition as well: the original with its reverse, two different melodic structures previously appearing separately, the same motif in transposed modes (thus obtaining bimodal moments).

Fig. 2a Sabin Pautza, *Canti prophani*, part I, mm. 102-108, small-size canon

Fig. 2b Sabin Pautza, *Canti prophani*, part I, mm. 111-115, superposition of the original version with its reverse

The superposition of minor seconds in example 2b are the result of the simultaneous use of two symmetrical modes with the axis interval of a minor second ( $F\#-G$ ). Dissonances (bad singing), in children's performance are quite frequent, we could say they are part and parcel of the charm of such performances for this particular age group. Sabin Pautza uses elaborate technical means in order to obtain the beauty of this effect, showcasing the children's lack of inhibition in their artistic effort filled with intonation accidents.

It is not uncommon for different groups of children to simultaneously sing different carols. The composer's skill has captured in this work precisely such a moment of overlapping, but the musical discourse has at the same time an outstanding expressive intensity. We note here the presence of two vocal groups: the first is singing as a responsorial a carol based on diminished values in a pentachordic sequence, while the second overlaps with a slow melodic line, expressive in the Dorian mode in  $E$ . The pentachord intoned by the first group consists of the first five sounds of the Dorian mode, thus the superposition of the two carols becomes natural and fluent.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for Soprano (S) and Alto (A) voices. The first system shows the Soprano part with lyrics 'Flori de mă - ru! Dal -' and the Alto part with lyrics 'Sus la mun-te nin-ge plo-uă dal-be flori!'. The second system shows the Soprano part with lyrics 'be flori de mări! Dal - be' and the Alto part with a more complex rhythmic accompaniment.

Fig. 3 Sabin Pautza, *Canti prophani*, part II, mm. 23-29

All the predictable and unpredictable circumstances of a carolling round are depicted throughout this work. We have, for instance, chants consisting of wordplay that makes no sense or of onomatopoeia that the composer merely organises around a rhythm. The onomatopoeias occur in unison or chanted by only one group of children, while the other group sing fragments of a carol – a situation that is common in real life, when there is a lack of consensus among the group. The combination between the collective declamation and the singing is a result both of the artist's inspiration and extraordinary mastery of composition techniques, but also of his ability to lend music an undeclared dramatic meaning, which becomes apparent as the work progresses. The effect has an immediate and definite effect on the listener, since it is spectacular and surprising.

Interestingly, the “plot” of this suite cannot be deduced based on the text, but instead based on a combination involving fragments of phrases and the musical meaning. The text itself is a mosaic composed, in a manner that is deliberately lacking coherence, of phrases specific to traditional carols (*dalbe flori*), fairy-tale characters (Călin, Daliana), Christian symbols the basil, the mother, the mantle of stars), wordplay (*roască-broască, race-drace*), without giving any hints to a narrative thread. Instead, the expressiveness of music allows us to distinguish the image of a group of children going carolling, going through various moods: singing (part III, mm. 30-107), playing (part I, mm. 93-109), being sad and longing for their mother (part III, mm. 108-135), disagreeing and, on the contrary, radiating happiness. The transition from one mood to another takes place abruptly, the way it happens with children of young age, in a short segment of time. Moreover, the entire suite is concentrated in a short time interval (around 15 minutes). The composer

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himself stated: “Many have told me that my music is film-like. I'm not aiming specifically for that, but my desire is, indeed, to express myself, I believe in communication, I'm not writing music for myself, I'm writing thinking about those who will listen to it” (Vasiliu, 2005, p. 63).

## **2.2. The orchestra – complementarity and colours**

Sabin Pautza's composition fantasy is fully manifest, however, in the manner in which he envelops in terms of timbre the children's choir, using a not-too-large, but a diverse orchestral formula. It is worth mentioning that, originally, the formula for the instrument group included only two pianos, a celesta and a few percussion instruments; later on, the composer expanded this ensemble, bringing it to the level of a generous chamber orchestra. Its composition, of an unusual diversity, includes a group of wind instruments (piccolo, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, one trumpet and one trombone), piano, celesta, harp, a string instrument group and a large number of percussion instruments, requiring three performers.

The mere listing of instruments gives a strong indication regarding the two parameters on which the composer based his work: rhythm and colour. Moreover, remarkably delightful timbral mixes are achieved, sometimes underlining the delicacy of young age, other times showing humour, and yet other times, more seldom, highlighting the mystical atmosphere of Christmas.

The suite structure includes several instrumental sections: the introductions of the first and the third part, several short bridges between the verses that are mainly sung by the choir, as well as a synthesis section located before the coda of the last part. Whereas the two introductions have the well-defined role of presenting the sound world specific to each of the parts, the abovementioned synthesis section (mm. 108-135) stands out among all the other moments of the suite in terms of depth. Firstly, it is remarkable due to the oppressive sound, suggesting sadness caused by an unnamed event. The children's sadness, so hard to bear in the eyes of adults, is masterfully described by the piano, harp, celesta and a few effects produced by percussion instruments, the most striking being that of a violin bow, which makes a cymbal vibrate. This is the only part where rhythm disappears and the author uses only elements he gives the variation treatment to, and which he augments with the motifs that had previously constituted the base of the singing game. Periodically, but not necessarily in a symmetrical manner, the choir sings about the mother's arrival. The modal superpositions are joined by the polyrhythmic ones (the celesta in triplets, the piano in syncopations on half-beats and the harp in asymmetrical syncopations), the writing technique reaching the limit of a texture polyphony based on an *ostinato* on the *C#*. For a brief period, the composer suspends all play, rhythm, effervescence, in a static music, an oppressive sound that lacks a gravitational centre.

Another moment that makes use of polyrhythmy is assigned to the bells, semantron and piano, precisely in order to suggest the random manner in which the two percussion instruments are used during the religious ritual.

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Campana, Toaca, and Piano. The Campana part is written in a treble clef with a 4/4 time signature, featuring a melody of quarter notes and eighth notes with triplets. The Toaca part is written in a bass clef with a 4/4 time signature, featuring a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and quarter notes. The Piano part is written in a grand staff with a 4/4 time signature, featuring a complex texture of sixteenth and thirty-second notes, including triplets and slurs.

Fig. 4 Sabin Pautza, *Canti prophani*, part II, mm. 90-91

The richness of timbres is enhanced using various effects from the string instrument group. The most common in this piece is the *flageolet*, followed by the use of extreme registers, of alternations of *pizzicato* with *legato* and of superpositions of effects that increase the charm and the richness of the orchestration. We also note the use of the *trill* not as a mere ornament, but instead as a colour effect in combination with the muting effect and with playing *sul ponticello* (m. 16, m. 17 in part II). The composer's imagination, combined with an astonishing mastery of the science of orchestration, contributes to creating an original approach of the way in which the ancestral melodic lines distributed to the choir are accompanied and completed in a modern manner by the orchestra.

Complementarity also works in terms of harmony. It is easy to understand that, in the context of a diatonic modal language, the choir does not display very elaborate chordal structures and linkages. The orchestra overlays on this harmonic simplicity, which is in its own way sufficient and fascinating, complex complementary structures that do not de-structure the modal vein, but instead lend it a modern nuance.

The composer also plays with the metric organisation, using extremely unusual superpositions. The performance of juxtaposing a voice (the flute) intoning a melody in a *giusto-syllabic* rhythm and another, whose metric structure is divisionary (2/4 measure) cannot go unnoticed. We also note the concern Sabin Pautza shows for the performers, taking care that they do not exert themselves: whenever the melody in *giusto-syllabic* is exposed on its own, an alternance of measures is used, but whenever the melody is in a



polyphonic and polymetric context, it fits the base measure, and the strong beats are underlined using accents.



Fig. 5a Sabin Pautza, *Canti prophani*, part III, mm. 1-5  
The initial metric of the theme, exposed monodically



Fig. 5b Sabin Pautza, *Canti prophani*, part III, mm. 14-18  
Fitting the theme in a divisionary metric in the context of a superposition of different metric plans

If we take a closer look at the second half of the example above, we note the elaborate manner in which the accompaniment is achieved. The harp clearly marks the beats, while the two voices assigned to the piano create polyrhythmic and polymetric effects by using triplets, however with the values clearly grouped in fours using *legato* and accents. This is the reason why the lower voice is a rhythmic augmentation of the upper one, by doubling the values. This counterpoint device is also used in relation to the voices of the choir ensemble. Throughout the suite we can see that the orchestral composition is to a great extent polyphonic, elaborate, frequently using motif variation, augmentation and diminution, sectioning motifs, using polymodal and polyrhythmic superpositions. All these complex devices never overload the musical discourse, the auditory effect being always a natural fluency, clarity, suspense and contrast.

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The architecture of the three parts of the suite is simple, strophic, without any ample developing sections, unitary due to the circulation of the motifs within the genre.

### 3. Conclusions

This article is just a brief analytical examination of the structure and depth of this suite, a starting point in the effort to clarify that behind its light-hearted and delightful sound stand, in fact, carefully elaborated constructions. The combination between the archaic, the children folklore's naïveté (in the best sense), the neoclassical and the modern composition techniques requires creative force, spirituality and much stylistic and aesthetic taste.

The result is a rare masterpiece in contemporary music, speaking to all ages, even though the performers are themselves children. Each of us, depending on our level of musical knowledge, can find something in this musical text: the children will enjoy the playfulness, the effects, the ruckus, while the commentators (the erstwhile children) will appreciate in the superlative the composition technique, the polystylism, the profundity.

*Canti prophani*, although a suite of carols clearly referring to the winter Holiday Season and to the traditions of the period, does not refer to the religious essence of Christmas. However, the icon that all children can relate to – the mother's image – is present throughout the work. When playing, when squabbling, when crying, always the carollers in the piece call the name of the person who is the centre of their universe “maico” (“mother”). The actual thread that binds all three sections of this work is the image of the mother.

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