

# Stylistic Reflections on Soprano Maria Slătinaru Nistor's Vocal Interpretation of the Lieder by Robert Schumann and Richard Wagner

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**Abstract:** The article aims to highlight the artistic personality of soprano Maria Slătinaru Nistor, born in Iași on May 25, 1938. A student of the distinguished opera and lied professor and soloist Arta Florescu, Maria Slătinaru Nistor shone on the world's greatest lyrical stages, both in Italian repertoire (as an incomparable Leonora in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*, earning accolades from audiences and music critics in Verdi's *Aida*, later portraying an impetuous and striking Floria Tosca in Puccini's opera, a role played over 250 times, as well as taking on Mimi in *La Bohème*, Liu and Turandot in Puccini's eponymous opera, *La Wally* in Catalani's opera, and *Gioconda* in Ponchielli's creation) and in German repertoire, interpreting roles in operas like *The Flying Dutchman*, *Lohengrin* and *Die Walküre* by Wagner with distinguished elegance. Additionally, the study aims to highlight the stylistic and vocal differences in Mrs. Slătinaru Nistor's art by delving into the world of German vocal miniatures, based on the Electrecord recordings for Robert Schumann's *op. 42 Frauenliebe und leben* (orchestrated by Theodor Rogalski) and Richard Wagner's *Five Songs on Verses by Mathilde Wesendonck* (orchestrated by Felix Mottl). The Electrecord recordings forming the basis of the analysis were performed by soprano Maria Slătinaru Nistor in collaboration with the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Corporation's Studio Orchestra, conducted by Carol Litvin, in 1981. This project dates back to the peak of the distinguished performer and professor's creative activity, whose artistic destiny began in Iași.

**Keywords:** vocal technique, Maria Slătinaru, *lied*, soprano, singing.

## 1. Introduction: Comparative Perspectives on Schumann-Wagner

Listening to the Electrecord album titled *Recital de lieduri Maria Slătinaru-Nistor: Schumann-Wagner* [Lied Recital Maria Slătinaru-Nistor: Schumann-Wagner], performed in collaboration with the Radio Romania Studio Orchestra conducted by Carol Litvin in 1981, we immediately notice that the common theme unifying these two works is love.

Exploring the place of lieder within Schumann's creations, we find that “while he expressed the tribulations of love through piano compositions, the fulfillment of his love for Clara was articulated through lieder. In 1840, deemed

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the year of lieder, he composed the first *Liederkreis op. 24* (with lyrics by Heine), the *Myrthen op. 25* cycle (seven lieder with lyrics by Rückert), the second *Liederkreis* (with lyrics by Eichendorf), *Frauenliebe und Leben op. 42* cycle with lyrics by Adalbert von Chamisso, *Dichterliebe op. 48* (Heine), and numerous individual lieder. Schumann developed the Schubertian tradition, giving the piano a more significant role in shaping the musical image. Brief preludes, interludes, and postludes frame the vocal part, commenting and complementing the poetic text, translated by the vocal line. Amidst the complexities of life, love takes the forefront. However, Schumann's exploration extends beyond idealistic depictions of love or the sorrow of separations, delving into subtle psychological analyses. Thus, the *Frauenliebe und Leben* cycle presents a rich and diverse portrayal of the feminine soul through impressive artistic imagery” (Pascu & Boțocan, 2003).

On the other hand, Richard Wagner's 5 *Lieder for voice and piano* date from 1857-1858, during his stay near Zurich on the property of his wealthy patron, Otto Wesendonck. Wesendonck's young and beautiful wife, Mathilde, became Wagner's muse, confidante, and lover, significantly influencing him. In a state of infatuation, Wagner interrupted work on *Siegfried* to dedicate himself to *Tristan und Isolde* (in September 1857). From November 1857 to May 1858, he composed these confessional and deeply emotional pages, considering them, according to notations made on the manuscript in October 1958 dedicated to Mathilde, “the best I have done, and only a small part of my work can be compared to them” (Lischle, 1994, p. 807).

For Schumann, meeting Clara Wieck, a renowned pianist and daughter of his mentor, Frederick Wieck, signified the triumph of love and the acquaintance that would become his wife. In contrast, for Wagner, the premiere of *The Wesendonck Lieder* led to his separation from his first wife, Minna Planner. At a private performance, Hans von Büllow was at the piano, and somewhere in the enchanted audience, moved by the peculiar sonorities of Wagner's music, was a young woman in tears: Franz Liszt's daughter, Cosima von Büllow, who would later become Cosima Wagner.

Wagner kept the mystery surrounding the author of the lieder. The first edition was published in 1862 without specifying the poet's name, intentionally creating confusion through the “androgynous eroticism” of his work, “with apparently gender-neutral words, hinting at several rhetorical questions: to whom was the message directed?” (Lischle, 1994, p. 808).

Of the five lieder, only *Träume* was orchestrated by Wagner for Mathilde's birthday, in December 1857, with the entire opus orchestrated by conductor Felix Mottl. Wagner himself labeled *lieder 3 (Schmerzen / Pains)* and *5 (Träume / Dreams)* as compositional studies for *Tristan and Isolde*. French researcher Andre Lischle (1994) considers *The Wesendonck Lieder* overall as sketches,

strongly influenced by the musical language of *Walküre* and *Siegfried*, proposing a parallel between Brünnhilde/Wotan and the Mathilde/Wagner relationship.

The eight lieder in Schumann's cycle *Frauenliebe und Leben*<sup>1</sup> form a cohesive whole, recounting the love story of a young girl, from the moment she sees her lover for the first time (*Lied no. 1, Seit ich ihn gesehen / Since I saw him, B flat Major*) until his death irreparably wounds her (*Lied no. 8, Nun hast du mir den ersten Schmerzen getan / Now you have caused me the first pain, d minor*). We encounter a medallion portrait of the lover (*Lied no. 2, Er, der Herrlichste von allen / He, the most splendid of all, E flat Major*), engagement, confessions to dear friends, departure from the maidenly universe of the parental home, and entry into the profound, mature world of accepted love.

The range of Schumann's lieder isn't extensive, the first spanning within an octave, a discreet tapestry of an entire inner universe lost in reverie is meticulously crafted. It requires a rich, effortless middle register, a full-color support for tones and phrases, suited for full lyrical voices capable of sustaining these *legatos* in the middle register against the misty backdrop of the lower register.

The piano takes the shape of an intimate confidant, a lyrical mirror, or a sound journal, casting a luminous shadow as an *alter ego* – a sophisticated commentator with myriad nuances, reactions, and psychological dispositions. Schumann allows the architecture of his lieder to be highly flexible. For example, the first lied, *Since I saw him*, is monostrophic, the second takes the form of a rondo with a pianistic epilogue, the third *I cannot understand or believe* [*Ich kann's nicht fassen, nicht glauben*] is tri-strophic with an instrumental epilogue. The fourth, *The ring on my finger* [*Du ring an meinem Finger*], is built of two couplets preceded by an eight-measure refrain and concluded with a four-measure epilogue. The fifth, *Help me, dear sisters* [*Helft mir, ihr Schwestern*], has an ABABA tri-pentastrophic form with a small coda, while the sixth approaches an *arioso* with three stanzas. Following the lively rhythm of the sixth, *Sweet friend, you gaze* [*Süsser freund, du blickest*], a moment of unique charm follows, tender and soothing, akin to a lullaby, portraying a mother's joy. Finally, in the last lied, Schumann returns to a monostrophic form to depict the tears of the widow, bringing the piano back to the mournful recitative motif from the first lied, constructing a symmetrical spiral of psychological musical motifs.

Schumann might have been “the most autobiographical composer, writing overwhelmingly personal music that reflects much of his inner world and creates an intimacy with listeners that no one had reached before him. There is a lot of sadness, but more light, hope, love, and joy in his music; he tended not to

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<sup>1</sup> Since the songs are untitled, as in the *Dichterliebe* [*A Poet's Love cycle*], the first line gives the title to the lied.

compose during acute periods of depression but waited for better days or used music as therapy” (Enescu-Aky, 2020).

While Wagner began orchestrating *The Wesendonck Lieder*, finished by Felix Mottl, Maria Slătinaru Nistor, accompanied by conductor Carol Litvin, interpreted Schumann's lieder orchestrated by Theodor Rogalski in 1981. From the musicological commentary accompanying the recording:

“There has often been talk of Schoenberg's monodrama *Erwartung* or Poulenc's *La voix humaine* as works of great originality due to the idea of creating a work with a single character; looking back in the history of music, we find, more than a hundred years ago, a similar idea in the monodrama created by Robert Schumann... As in some piano cycles, Schumann surpasses the principle of grouping solely on the basis of a binding idea, creating much more complex relationships based on evident dramaturgy. The action - because we can speak of an action similar to that of a lyrical drama - recounts the story of a woman who recalls the sad tale of her love. The reminiscence (a leitmotif function in the piano accompaniment suggesting the narrative's return through memory devices) unfolds the emotions of initial encounters, the joy of fulfillment, and the tragic separation. Thus, we have an opera made with extremely modern means of maximum economy, through characteristic sequences, by eliminating any conventional detail” (Bonea, 1981).

This outlines an approach to orchestration from an original, bold, yet truthful perspective in terms of musical truth. It serves as the starting point for a highly valuable, intellectually constructed interpretation by soprano Maria Slătinaru Nistor, characterized by subtle vocal stylistic differentiations.

## 2. Introduction to the universe of Wagnerian soundscapes

**Motto:**

*Everything that is perfect in its own way must transcend its species,  
it must become something else, an incomparable thing.  
In some sounds, the nightingale is still a bird;  
then it rises beyond its species, and it seems to want  
to show every bird what it truly means to sing.*  
(Goethe)

If we were to study a snowflake crystal under a microscope, we would observe how hexagonal prisms intertwine into floral tapestries, migrating from their initial forms – columnar or needle-shaped, flat or dendritic – revealing the metamorphosis process of a water droplet. Placing a drop of Wagner's music under the lens of our auditory microscope, we'd be amazed by the geological layers of harmonics accompanying, like a royal retinue, the fundamental Lohengrin, dressed in the grey fabrics of Nibelung mists.

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Through the aural tympanic lens, we'd notice the aged forehead of the Alps, somber under snow, the rustle of the endless Turingian forests, the violet-blue shadows of dusk where rocks project their majestic and contemplative profile, reminiscent of the heroes, giants, and gods of Walhalla. Rocks damned to become sound, we sense the murmuring of swift mountain rivers, the percussion of woodcutters evoking the sound of crucifixion, personifications, and allegories, sound as an osmosis between orchestral timbre and the roar of the human soul, a monumental artesian of emotions, introspections, generator of a path of return, hand in hand with our profound Self, home, in myth, in the place of origin, in the matrix of the world. To essence.

A sound, at times as heavy as lava, with a train carried by processions of Nibelungs emerging from the velvet moss of the forest, is the simmering universe of a forming world, tending to coagulate into motives, geometries, and sonic fabrics, in strings of grey pearls from the cosmic shell of the sea, strings and condensed sound algorithms like blood painfully spurting from the freshly squeezed grape of the heart.

There are artists who burned prematurely, but Wagner lingered in the womb of his own creation, gestating in tormenting struggles for many years. He spent a long time in his monarch butterfly cocoon, weaving with meticulousness the immense silk canvas of his art.

When an artist, a vocal performer, opens a score of Wagner to enter, through the covers of his music, into the fantastic, living, mutating forest of his incantations, they seek to imprint myth, dreaming, through colors, pulsations, and sonic eviscerations in search of the sword\_sound, the ivory\_sound, the brown\_sound, the edelweiss\_sound, the birch\_sap\_sound, the Lohengrin\_hum, and the Nibelung\_clamor, the oily sound of love that consumes a character like Kundry, torn from the impenetrable depths of a soul buried under rocks of dreams and renunciation, a sound drawn from abysses into light, sonic vestments towards paroxysmal experiences, of a disturbing delirium, vibrant, tormenting, but ultimately cathartic. It's a sound deeply implanted in the subconscious, in the unpetrified magma of beginnings, a summons like a magical horn sound, urging you to embody danger and sip from the bitter cup of trials as the only path and key to the liberation of the night of human thoughts from the dark pallor of spells, of evil games, a seal of the dawn's deliverance.

Such an interpreter was Maria Slătinaru Nistor, who, in the years of full creative effervescence, knew how to probe the sonic ontologies of Wagnerian dreams. That's why subjecting the stylistic-aesthetic analysis of the titan's vocal art from Bayreuth represents a penetration into the mythological layers of his sonic sedimentations and quests, meaning the stirring of the immense stalagmitic coral reef composing the pillars of this strange, pluvial, aquatic, tropospheric, and legendary universe, with Freudian psychoanalytic incisions and Nietzschean flashes, in which poetry reflects upon the reality's torrent, like a twilight tornado,

an initiatory journey, of self-discovery, an apoteotic, sacred journey, towards origins.

In his music, an immense fresco in the German style is depicted, Wagner being a colorist of mists, like Aivazovsky, a painter of the sea, of its wild storms and moments of calm, when above the steel dragon of the waves, in the upper sea (in the skies), the moon or the morning star takes on strange reflections, open gates to a world of elongated and iridescent beings, a messenger of a superior mind. In his music, the chill of glaciers is perceived, in the crevasses of chords and chromaticisms, one feels the states of glacial erosions, of the thawing of the *impenetrable human* with nature, the condensation of feelings and thoughts into shards, into the beaks and claws of demons, but also into the ice prisms of angelic heroes, damned under the burden of secular curses. It's the vapor, the tear, and the freezing full of frustration of renunciations.

Wagner's music is an enormous, continuous, spasmodic confession, camouflaging in the barred cages of seventh and ninth chords, in the oak and cherry cradle of violins condemned to the gallery, the unleashing of waves and the lunar floor of the sea as a depth of the human soul, a thousand times darker. Man appears to us possessed by spirits like a ghost\_ship, and here is the soul as a scene of the struggle between damnation and liberation, the composer cleaving before our eyes the viscera of the most hidden calls and feelings, reading with Freudian mage eyes into the pain that stabs him. As an audience, we feel this cry for help, for growing despair, to the extent that music is not just a sonic chain but an incantation, a ritual, a thaumaturgic language through which this pain makes itself known, exorcised. The air of this music, so powerfully evocative, Ibsenian in its power to recall long-lost stories, is revealed to us through the triggering technique of crucial events influencing the present. We feel the rocky, dark, and humid relief that causes the language of these places to embrace strong, glassy consonant structures that overcome the shocking scream of silence, to pierce the humidity of refreshing summers and to traverse the air like the gallop of a deer under pine trees or the rush of a sleigh among the drowsy mountains in the den of winter, to avoid avalanches. Suddenly, we understand the dark, harsh, cold colors of the vowels and consonants of the language of Goethe, Schiller, Schumann, or Wagner; the cold summers and mild winters in the German relief influence the range of human manifestations transposed into art: the smoldering chill of marble, with veins of blood visible. Sounds\_bog, heraldic sounds, full of mysterious meanings and symbols of national dignity, pine buds of choral moments, deer branches of rivers, vascularizations from the hydrographic basin of orchestral and human sound.

### **3. From the array of lyrical voices to the portrait of a prima donna**

In the array of voices in lyrical theater, there are several criteria used for the classification of the human voice. In his book, *The Sung Voice*, French acoustician Raul Husson suggests categorizing voices based on texture and range

/ vocal extension, according to vocal strength, penetration, or brilliance, the general thickness of the voice, and the volume of the voice, establishing that, based on voice power, we encounter grand opera voices (130 dB and above, *opera* between 110-120 dB, *operetta* between 90-100 dB, *concert*, salon / chamber voices between 80-90 dB, microphone - under 80 dB). This intensity varies according to the acute direction of harmonics, frontal or lateral, as well as the anatomical construction of the opera singer's vocal apparatus. Also, depending on volume, there is a wide range of voices, from small to enormous.

The raised or lowered position of the larynx influences the vocalic and extra-vocalic timbre that imparts color to the voice, thus encountering bright voices, open for techniques with the larynx positioned upwards, and voices with a dark timbre for techniques denoting a low positioning of the larynx (Chelaru, 2004, pp. 110-112).

Among the particularities that define and classify a voice is also the criterion of voice thickness, determined by the characteristics of the larynx and, depending on penetration: from faded voices to harsh, rigid, metallic voices, and warm voices, with a velvety emission, as the longevity of vocal brilliance is a sign of vocal health and correct technical and repertorial usage.

Another spectacular criterion of vocal classification is given by “their use in lyrical theater according to the volume of the hall: from first-category halls between 25,000-30,000m<sup>3</sup> to fourth-category halls, between 7,000-10,000m<sup>3</sup>” (Husson, 1968, p. 137). Among the true sanctuaries of art, we find scenes such as the *Metropolitan Opera* in New York, part of the *Lincoln Center*, spread over an area of 6 hectares, with the opera house being one of the largest in the world, alongside the *Bolshoi Theater* Moscow, *Grand Opera* Paris, *La Scala* in Milan, *Bayreuth* in Germany, *Vienna State Opera* in Austria.

Playing a primordial role in choosing the opera repertoire and defining solo interpretative careers, the **texture** and **range of the voice** divide high female voices, circumscribed to the soprano, into a wide range of subdivisions with many nuances and tendencies that singing teachers, performers, and impresarios must reflect on at length and with great attention. We encounter roles for: coloratura soprano, where coloratura is visibly differentiated from lyric coloratura to dramatic coloratura soprano, as well as dramatic soprano of agility / coloratura. We'll find voices of *lyric coloratura*, *lyric-light voices*, *full lyric sopranos*, *spinto sopranos*, *lyric-dramatic sopranos*, *dramatic sopranos*, and *falcon voices*.

The Romanian system of classifying the sung voice has its roots in the Italian opera space, with which it feels related both through linguistic affinities and through the fact that there has been “a strong tradition of professional collaborations, as well as great timbral and repertorial compatibility” (Chelaru, 2015, pp. 110-112). In the Italian space, vocal equivalences are: *coloratura soprano*, *dramatic coloratura soprano*, *light soprano*, *lyric-light soprano*, *lyric*

*soprano, lyric-dramatic soprano, sfogato soprano, soubrette soprano, falcon soprano, dramatic soprano, Wagnerian soprano.*

In the German system, Fach, we encounter: *lyrical coloratura soprano, coloratura soubrette, dramatic coloratura soprano, German soubrette / character soprano, lyrical soprano, youthful dramatic soprano, high-dramatic soprano.*

This vast spectrum of vocal classification nuances, present today in lyrical theater and classical vocal pedagogy, on scientific bases, reveals multiple anatomical-physiological and timbral configurative aspects, from the often fragile, sylph-like, sibilant constitution of lyric coloratura sopranos to the statuesque, heroic constitution of Verdi dramatic singers and, especially, Wagnerian sopranos, whose titanic altitude also reflects the colossal strength of legendary characters from Nordic mythology.

Reflecting on the above tabel, **Maria Slătinaru Nistor's** voice encompassed, during the period of full artistic brilliance, a grand opera voice, an enormous voice, which sang on the world's biggest stages, “asserted itself in a repertoire that included Italian, German, French, Russian, and Romanian schools” (Poen, 2018), through roles of great technical and expressive difficulty and density, evolving during periods of interpretative vocal creation from full lyric soprano towards the dramatic zone, from the Mozartian lyrical density in the role of Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro* towards the role of Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème*, evolving from Mozartian lyricism towards the veristic with bold nuances of Puccini, embodying other bold reflections in the role of Leonora in Beethoven's *Fidelio* or in the brilliant portrayal of the roles of Liu and Turandot in Puccini's eponymous opera, migrating over time towards Verdi's dramatic roles, portraying Leonora in *Il Trovatore* or in the titular role of *Aida*. One of the scores in which her voice was perfected was that of Floria Tosca in Puccini's *Tosca*, performed over 250 times, being one of the career's reference roles, with the German press noting in 1977 that *Slătinaru had no rival in the world*.

Alongside the lyrical repertoire, the symphonic vocal included: Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*, Mozart's *Requiem*, Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*, Fauré's *Requiem*, Mahler's *Symphony No. 8*, Dvořak's *Stabat Mater*, Janáček's *Glagolitic Mass* (complete), alongside immense activity transmitting concerts, shows, and televised concerts with selections from Sviridov's *Pathetic Oratorio*, 1963, with David Ohanessian, conductor Carol Litvin; in 1969, Ponchielli's *Gioconda* with Michaela Botez, Ludovic Spiess, Octav Enigărescu, Nicolae Florei, conductor Ion Drăcea; February 1969, Monteverdi's *Il ritorno di Ulisse in Patria* alongside Martha Kessler, Gheorghe Crăsnaru, Valentin Teodorian, Ion Stavru, Pompei Hărășteanu, Eduard Tumagenian, conductor Ludovic Bacs; in 1970, *Turandot* with George Mircea, Nicolae Florei, Ludovic Spiess, Teodora Lucaciu, Octav Enigărescu, Valentin Teodorian, Corneliu Fănățeanu, Dionisie Konya, conductor Karol Litvin; in October 1970, Verdi's *Missa da Requiem*, with



Elena Cernei, Vasile Moldoveanu, Nicolae Florei, conductor Armando la Rosa Parodi; 1971, the role of Maddalena in *Andrea Chénier*, alongside Cornel Stavru, Nicolae Herlea, Zenaida Pally, Nicolae Secăreanu, conductor Carol Litvin; January 1972, *La forza del destino*, Leonora, alongside Ludovic Spiess, Herlea, Zenaida Pally, Nicolae Florei, conductor Carol Litvin. In 1977, *Siegfried, Götterdämmerung* - concert selections: Maria Slătinaru (Brünnhilde), Cornel Stavru (Siegfried), conductor Ludovic Bacs, and in 1992, a concert reprise of the *Wesendonck Lieder* conducted by Andrea Ridereli.

Referring to the career of the great interpreter, musicologist Stephan Poen wrote:

“Maria Slătinaru Nistor had an intense and prestigious artistic trajectory for a quarter of a century during which she honored both foreign audiences and the Romanian public equally. If the beginning of her career, in 1969, coincides with a certain period of relaxation of the dictatorial tension of the communist regime, allowing the assertion of many Romanian artists abroad, in capitalist countries, after a decade, the tension and restrictions applied to the population were to affect lyrical artists. Maria Slătinaru Nistor succeeded in a beautiful journey of European, American, Asian, and Australian theaters, continuing to return home according to the time interval of the visas granted. For today's youth, these accounts are unbelievable, but such times existed, and that generation of artists faced them with dignity and great character strength.” (Poen, 2018)

#### **4. Teachers, Mentors. The Tradition of the Old School of Singing**

Often compared to Renata Tebaldi, Maria Slătinaru Nistor was noticed by dramatic soprano Florica Mărieș, her first vocal teacher, when she was a student at Oltea Doamna High School. Her first three years of academic singing were at the Conservatory in Iași, where she was taught by George Pascu, Ion Pavalache, Mihai Cozmei. She later studied at the National University of Music in Bucharest, the former *Ciprian Porumbescu Conservatory*, under the guidance of the esteemed teacher Arta Florescu. She collaborated with: *Vienna State Opera*, *Gran Teatro Liceo* in Barcelona, Spain, *Metropolitan Opera* New York, *Teatro La Fenice* in Venice, *Grand Opera* in Paris, theaters in Bordeaux, Bern, Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Basel, Strasbourg, Brussels, Florence, Verona, Tokyo, San Francisco, Montreal, Melbourne (Constantinescu, 2018, p. 2).

Even during her university studies, where she graduated at the top of her class, Maria Slătinaru Nistor won numerous awards at International Singing Competitions including: *Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky International Competition* in Moscow; *George Enescu International Competition* in Bucharest; *Toulouse International Competition* in France; *'s Herzogenbusch* in the Netherlands; Verviers in Belgium, and Francesco Vinas in Spain.

She was hired by conductor Octav Enigărescu as a soloist for the Romanian Opera in Bucharest in 1969, performing the role of Elisabetta di Valois in Verdi's *Don Carlo*, impressing not only with her impeccable mastery of the Verdi score but also with the flawless conduct of her voice. This talent, marking the beginning of her exceptional career, was confirmed through roles in over four decades of uninterrupted stage and pedagogical activity.

On the night of her debut at the Romanian Opera in Bucharest, the cast included: Elena Cernei, another legend of the Romanian singing school, in the role of Eboli; Cornel Stavru as Don Carlo; Dan Iordăchescu as Rodrigo; Nicolae Florei as Filippo II; Ioan Hvorov as the Grand Inquisitor; Silvia Voinea as Voce dal Cielo. Another Verdi debut, with Leonora from *Il Trovatore*, in March 1970 was completed with Elena Cernei as Azucena, Ion Buzea-Manrico, Vasile Martinoiu as Count di Luna, presented in Italian by the soloists of the Romanian Opera from Bucharest at *Wienesbadener Mai Festspiele*, Austria. The high level of preparation of the Romanian soloists is evidenced by the names that made up the second cast: Magda Ianculescu, Zenaida Pally, Cornel Stavru, Dan Iordăchescu (Poen, 2018).

Inheriting from her teacher, Arta Florescu, intellect, work organization, rigor, creative power, study perseverance, problem-solving methodology, cultural background, love for reading, and passion for information in any field of human knowledge, Maria Slătinaru Nistor continues the tradition followed by previous generations of Romanian vocal musicians and pedagogues, including Elena Saghin, Alexandra Feraru - Elena Teodorini's student, Lucia Cozma, Lina Dores, Nicolae Livezeanu from whom Arta Florescu took “ornamentation and the pathos of the melodic recitative of Renaissance music and beyond, the theory of timbre colors whose possibilities a singer must know and use to reveal the emotional value of the word transmitted by sound, the mastery of combining shades in dressing the musical phrase, 'in the sense of completing an overall image that, the more convinced you are of what you're doing, captivates the audience more” (Chelaru, 2020, p. 197).

Referring to the masters who guided her steps in music, Maria Slătinaru Nistor evokes Mihail Jora, Marțian Negrea, and even Enescu himself decrypted the approach of the *7 songs on verses by Clement Marot*. During dialogues with the renowned Iosif Sava, she mentioned that “following Enescu's model, preparing a recital or a lesson at the conservatory meant extensive information, analysis, finishing, dedication”, painting a noble definition of the concept of vocal interpretation as “the art of giving life, to parameters-if possible-unattained until you, to signs in which another artist has encapsulated a moment of experience for Time and Man” (Chelaru, 2020, p. 197). Just a generation away from the values transmitted by the personalities mentioned above, in the spirit of tradition, Maria Slătinaru Nistor took on this impetus and artistic belief and followed it with strength, knowledge, and eloquence, building a destiny of a great

creator that transcended national borders, entering the realm of universality. As evidence, we have the quality of recordings from the Romanian Radio Television's gold library, the Electrecord discography with cycles of songs by Schumann and Wagner, the complete recording of Puccini's *Turandot*, Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* with the Discover International record label, Belgium, she recorded Puccini's *Il Tabarro* complete; at Radio Romania, she presented complete operas by Monteverdi, Giordano, Beethoven, and, on Radio Köln, Germany, the first audition of the opera *Der arme Henrich* by Pfitzner (Constantinescu, 2018, p. 2).

### **5. Opera Singer on the Great Stages of the World. Triumph in the Italian Opera Repertoire and Particularly in the German Repertoire, Especially in Wagnerian Roles. Vocal Characteristics**

Returning to the criteria for evaluating a sung voice mentioned at the beginning of our study, we will notice the exceptional qualities with which Maria Slătinaru Nistor was endowed: an enormous, generous, expansive, enveloping voice of great timbral beauty, comparable to Renata Tebaldi's. Her interpretations in Puccini's *Turandot*, from the TVR golden sound archive recordings, partnering with dramatic *spinto* tenor Ludovic Spiess, in full vocal glory, are also comparable to those of Ghena Dimitrova at the Arena di Verona with Nicola Martinucci, or the legendary Birgit Nilsson, with spectacular dramatic sound effects like a massive star with thousands of ice needles sparkling in the moon and sunlight, eclipsing and dominating everything on stage.

In Maria Slătinaru Nistor's operatic music from the Italian repertoire, we will note the effortless blend of legato, expansive breathing, with highly intense dramatic accents without forcing the voice, without pushing it. We'll note the robustness of the middle register, extremely passionate, enveloping, with much lyricism, the beauty of the full, fleshy, well-timbred tone, animated by harmonics, a lush timbral richness, being amazed by the thousands of reflections of the shining high notes “like a grape that swallowed all the sunlight”, the homogeneity of the registers, the imperceptible transitions from low to middle and astonishing high notes, capable of both apocalyptic high notes in *forte* or *fortissimo*, and ethereal, levitating *pianissimos*, unreal transitions and sonic choreographies summing up the multitude of human voice facets.

With colors ranging from cello, viola to violin, Maria Slătinaru Nistor's voice leads us in the gallery of characters from the opera world, from Donna Anna in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust* to Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, Abigaille in *Nabucco*, the titular role in *Aida*, Desdemona in Verdi's *Otello*, Alice Ford in *Falstaff*, Leonora in *La forza del destino*, Amelia in *Un ballo in maschera*, Santuzza in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, Gioconda in Ponchielli's opera, Liza in Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, Mimi in Puccini's *La Bohème*, Manon in Massenet's *Manon Lescaut*, Pamina in *The Magic Flute*,

Maddalena in Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*. A traversal of styles from Mozartian elegance towards Italian Romanticism to verismo, and the fabulous, rare power of her voice allowed her to delve into the unique universe of German operas, especially the Wagnerian ones, which serve as a true test for dramatic singers. The dramatic Verdi roles, with dramatic coloratura inserts, require technically mature voices, with stage experience and voice control to rise above the orchestral flames, over the chorus, and in harmony with the stage partners, a rich, well-calibrated medium register, chromatic richness, with great confidence in the high notes in *forte* over the unleashed surges in the musical phrases' climaxes, concluding with a *crescendo* dance of garlands and sparks, *staccatos*, roulades, *portamentos*, and *glissandos* displayed in the final cadenzas.

In this regard, Georgeta Pinghireac highlighted the stylistic differentiations required for Verdi's roles in the last period of his creation, compared to verist composers, or the vocal requirements imposed on interpreters of Richard Wagner's music:

“Giuseppe Verdi definitively breaks the idea of pure vocal sound beauty, subordinating it to dramatic effects, thus creating a new type of soprano called dramatic soprano *d'agilita*, with the exception of the role of Gilda in the opera *Rigoletto*. The Italian verist school: Puccini, Leoncavallo, Mascagni, Giordano Cilea, is rich in dramatic accents and effects, especially in the middle register, close to the soprano's high notes, with many hammered sounds (accentuated, struck), and hard attacks, often abandoning softness in the attack. Verismo emphasizes the importance of the lyrical light soprano and the dramatic soprano. Richard Wagner prefers a dramatic soprano with access to the high register and a dark timbre, similar to that of a mezzo-soprano, for negative roles. The light soprano sporadically appears in Wagner's works as a Shepherd in *Tannhäuser* or the *Unseen Bird*. The only exception to the lyrical soprano in Wagner is found in the opera *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, in the role of Eva” (Pinghireac, 2003, pp. 236-237).

## **6. In the World of German Vocal Miniatures: Interpretative Considerations on the Orchestral Versions of the Song Cycles *Frauenliebe und Leben* by Robert Schumann and *Fünf Gedichte* based on texts by Mathilde Wesendonck by Richard Wagner**

Listening to the recordings made alongside the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Studio Orchestra under the baton of maestro Carol Litvin, from 1981, we notice right from the start a high accuracy in the German language rendition, devoid of any harshness, a calligraphic feature of the sonic brush, a finely crafted vocalization, certainly based on an exceptional natural endowment, the fabric taking on reflections akin to a brocade with silver inserts, like a Nordic queen, a sovereign of the sonorous snows.

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In the interpretation of the opus *Frauenliebe und Leben*, we sense in the chiseling of Schumann's phrasing the Viennese school of the lively Mozart, we note the impeccable pronunciation, fine articulation, diamond-like diction in the tradition of the German singing school, transitions to the head register, the theory of timbre colors revealed by her teacher, Arta Florescu, in dialogues with the great musicologist Iosif Sava.

The perfectly chosen tempos reflect the tuning of the lively impulsiveness of Mozartian opera heroines, the Mozartian countess transforming and donning, in Schumann's lied, the garments of a woman in love, and the characteristic dreaming in his music being underlined in musicological reflections interpreted by Cella Delavrancea or Arta Florescu. The emission and hues impeccably arc the successions of musical phrases in a crucible of metamorphoses of the polished tone, stalagmitic, like a myrtle flower that overnight turns into a tapestry of ice flowers.

The velvety softness of *legato*, the science of ample, sustained breaths, the perfectly centered tone, the majestic flow of phrases, with refined culminations, reveal an interpretation comparable to the most demanding renditions of the universal lyrical scene. We note the agility of the groupettes in the final phrases, in *lied no. 2*, always adorned in different vocal colors, embellishing the melodic line, the dramatic accents achieved with great finesse. We are enveloped in the ineffable aroma of honey from the voice whose harmonics embrace something of the warmth of a summer sunset, where scents of thyme rise in the air intoxicated by the night's smells like a lovestruck soul. Similar to a goddess descended from Walhalla, the emission of Mrs. Maria Slătinaru Nistor reveals a graceful, stirring, hot, and at the same time icy sound, a Viennese elegance of emission. A tone that captures light as if through stained glass. Moreover, Romania has been and is blessed with voices such as Elena Cernei, Nicolae Herlea, Dan Iordăchescu, Elena Teodorini, the legendary Hariclea Darclée, Florica Cristoforeanu, Magda Ianculescu, the mythical voice of David Ohanessian, Zenaidea Pally, Nelly Miricioiu, Viorica Cortez, Maria Slătinaru Nistor.

Listening with the utmost attention, we discover and rediscover an impeccably timbred voice, perfectly controlled and carried with the precision of a Swiss clock, reflecting a profound knowledge of the German style, as a hallmark of interpretation. We notice a fine stylistic differentiation in the interpretation of Schumann's lieder compared to the interpretation of Wagnerian lieder.

A first attention comes to light in the way it resolves the sounds in the low register: even in the intonation of the deep sounds in Schumann's *lied no. 8*, the voice remains dreamy, ethereal, without heavy, harsh descents in the chest voice, without unaesthetic jerks and pushes with glottal hits, but remains anchored like a compass, like Ariadne's thread in the vocal labyrinth and the musical text, like a star that always points north through the science of keeping the sound domed

in a high position. A noble emission, rounded, with the classical Viennese tradition of tone emission.

If in the first lied we encounter a restrained emission, glimpsing the portrait of a mature woman and her confessions shrouded in mystery, with hints of myrtle, wild chamomile, lavender, and silk flowers that drape her veil, of velvet gloves and revelations from intimacy, in the second lied, the refinement of intoning the groupettes is revealed based on the key words in the phrase, their folding, modulation, and articulation to emphasize and give way to the feelings that animate sound and verb.

The Electrecord recordings remain evidence of collecting the nectar of voice at the peak of artistic creation and sensation. The endings, sublime, in *piano*, *pianissimo* with a Viennese porcelain imperial monogram, the swirls of the voice dressing the harmonic voice in rogvai colors. We distinguish the always fresh phrasing of the voice, tones bathed in light, with marbled iridescence, a voice enveloped in veils and romantic silks, a warm marble voice, an apoteotic, allegorical vestment of heroines descended from the paths of Nordic mythology, embedded in time by the music of Weber, Beethoven and, apoteotically, by the zenith of Wagner's music.

The interpretation of Schumann's and Wagner's lieder retains its chamber-like texture, the atmosphere remaining intimate, confessional, between interpreter and listener, the tone being translucent like amber, a trout wavering in the sheen of the musical phrase as a reflection of the composer's thoughts, dreams, and poetic experiences.

Concluding within the same chords and musical motifs as in the beginning of the first lied, Maria Slătinaru Nistor's voice leads us under the crowns of the alleys of the human soul into the season of love, into the trembling universe of a woman in love. The tones are more expansive, filled with dreams and budding desires, poetic, contrasted with the somber, pained colors of the voice in the end, after the heroine has tasted the cup of grief in the moment of the loved one's death.

The voice does not lose its magnetism even after meticulous repetitive hearings but remains like an eternal citadel enduring time, preserving its mystery, power of captivation, and attracting force. The audience feels summoned to decipher, to unlock the chest of understanding this voice like an ermine fur. The *spinto*-dramatic texture mixes in the resonance chest with a multitude of shades of intoxicating and ecstatic lyricism, equally fascinating the ease of carrying the voice, despite the monumental massiveness of volume. The voice traverses smoothly through the registers, imperceptibly passing through the passage zone without tonal color changes from low to medium. The high notes are soft, homogeneous, agile, with shades of dark resin, Black Forest fir needles, and moonlit pearls of light.

Between the pages of Schumann's poetic confessions, we seem to find an interpretation of the emotions of Mozart's countesses, as well as a refiguration

of Wagnerian heroines among whom Isolde, Elsa, avatars of mature women, aware of their feelings, mysterious femininity assumed, a portrayal of the feminine soul, romantic in its essence, laden with sensuality, desire, maternity, sacrifice, generosity, and immense devotion.

In the interpretation of Wagner's lieder, the Romanian soprano reveals a magnetic power to lead, from the sources of melody to the mouths of harmony, on the endless sea of higher spirit, a voice that grows, navigating like a ship, on the gray sea of melodic configurations, bathing it in lethargic pianissimos, crystallized in the northern lights of endings. Reminiscent of the Nordic tradition of dramatic Wagnerian voices, Kirsten Flagstad, Lilli Lehmann, Martha Mödl, the legendary Birgit Nilsson, Maria Slătinaru Nistor's voice triumphantly pierces with magical force the icebergs of intervals. Once again, we notice the rich timbral and harmonic wealth of the voice, the lofty, melodious construction of the attack, the perfectly centered tone in the resonators, the forceful voice from *Stehe still [Stand still] No.1* towards *Schmerzen [Pains]* where the lights of the voice embrace the tears of the lyrical self, melting into the dense orchestral accompaniment.

Maria Slătinaru Nistor's vocal performance in the Wagnerian universe embodies a blend of sweetness in emission with an excellent merging of fluid, infinite breaths. Stemming from the compositional demands of this endless music, the performer brings an undisturbed calmness, a goddess-like serenity above the sonic flow, where Maria Slătinaru's voice becomes, in the ecstatic eyes of the attentive listener, an immense river carrying with it the relentless, Heraclitean flow of human heartache along with the bouquet of poems of the Wagnerian muse, Mathilde Wesendonck: *Stehe still, Der Engel, Schmerzen, In Treibhaus, Träume*. The meticulous, impeccable pronunciation gives birth to a profound perception of this enveloping music, with its groves of aurora borealis, mists, glaciers at the top of which burgeon complex harmonic weaves, and above all, this ample, magnificent voice.

And because fascination for Wagner's music cannot easily fade, here are the words through which Thomas Mann expressed his admiration for the sufferings and grandeur of the maestro from Bayreuth, extinguished in Venice, whose sonorities soprano Maria Slătinaru Nistor intuitively captured in her art: “a penchant, an inclination towards vastness, towards fundamental opera, towards the monumental and grandiose, by a united quantity, quite strangely, with a passion for the miniature and meticulous, for the soulful detail. Yes, a grandeur, specifically a somber, sorrowful one, a skeptical grandeur laden with bitterness, with the fanaticism of truth, which in the intoxication of fleeting beauty knows how to find a moment of brief, faithless happiness” (Mann, 1972, p. 30).

Mann emphasizes that Wagner's music “encompasses that specific vastness of naturalism, using the technique of the Homeric leitmotif, and his musical ars poetica was imbued with the desire to purify and sanctify art because «purifying

and sanctifying art meant for him a means of purifying and sanctifying a corrupt society»” (Mann, 1972, p. 34). Through Mann's eyes, Wagner was a cathartic figure, a moralist who through aesthetic consecration sought to liberate society from luxury, from the rule of money, and from the lack of love. A fervent admirer of Wagner and ending as his detractor, Nietzsche recorded that “the inner world of characters from *Tannhäuser* anticipates those from *Parsifal* and that this opera represents only a summing up of the creation of an entire deeply and romantically Christian life, leading it to completion with grand consistency. His last work is also the most theatrical, an art of sensuality and symbolic formulations, for the leitmotif is a formula, more than that, a chalice, arrogating to itself an almost religious authority, leading us towards the church ritual, and I believe that the secret longing, the supreme ambition of the theater is the ritual from which it sprung, both in pagans and Christians. The art of theater meant in itself the Baroque, Catholicism, church; and an artist like Wagner, who was accustomed to handling symbols and chalices, in the end had to feel akin to the priest, even the priest himself” (Mann, 1972, p. 34).

Both in opera and in the *Wesendonck Lieder*, which he considered, by his own admission, exercises preceding the creative labor of *Tristan and Isolde*, Wagner gathers, subjugates, and exploits the golden ore of myth, psychology, and music, developing the psychological art of the Wagnerian musician, the musical poetics of Wagnerian psychology, and the psychoanalysis of frescoes, the almost Dostoevskian density of the lyrical confessions of Wagnerian heroes, as many facets of the profound self, introspections into the complicated, dualistic, deliberately ambiguous depths, with a virtuosity of psychological characterization of both the characters and the unveiling of their most intimate feelings, probing and touching both the demonic dross of some and the angelic of others.

## **7. Beyond Conclusions: The Artistic Legacy of Maria Slătinaru Nistor**

The discographic audition of Schumann's and Wagner's lieder, interpreted by Mrs. Maria Slătinaru Nistor, embodies the concept of an interpretative treasure, a palpable sonic testimony of a profound stylistic knowledge of the German compositional universe, through meticulous detailing of intervals and sonic portrayals—a recognizable seal over the arch of time of a voice of great timbral beauty, but also of impeccable mastery of the elements of the German singing school.

It becomes a benchmark in the way the performer, along with conductor Carol Litvin and orchestra, succeeds in maintaining the chamber texture, the intimate, confessional atmosphere between performer and audience, by delicately capturing nuances. The tone remains translucent as amber, much like a trout wavering in the mirror of the musical phrase, reflecting the thoughts, dreams, and poetic experiences of the composer. It is admirable and sets a model that is



difficult to reach and almost impossible to surpass, both for young aspirants to a lyrical career and for the established ones.

The soprano retains much of Schumann's nostalgic dreaming, weaving the immense fresco of her voice navigating among the mysterious rocks and waters of Wagner's music. Although the colors are cold, warmth shines through, blending among sounds and harmonies, strips of soul, taming both the listener and the music itself.

But the story doesn't stop here... from the vast chest of information about the art of singing and interpretative stylistics, Maria Slătinaru Nistor chose to pass on her knowledge to generations of artists, engaging in a long pedagogical process of refining voices that will sing this repertoire over the years, with a reverence bordering on sacredness.

In an interview with Ileana Ocolișan Baba (2020) at Novi Sad Radio, in 1998, as a guest in the jury of the *Muzička omladina* [*Musical Youth*] Festival, she confessed with modesty about the exceptional performance of a mezzo-soprano who had since become an opera soloist in Belgrade, Tamara Marković, and had attended a masterclass in Bucharest under her guidance. Marković frequently performed on the stage of the Bucharest *Athenaeum*, marking three successful debuts at the *National Opera* with *Carmen*, *Don Carlos*, and *Aida*. Among the merits of her pedagogical performances, there are also a few evocations of the past on the lyrical stage:

“I toured with the Romanian Opera Ensemble in Bucharest during the period when I had the fortunate opportunity to sing alongside the golden generation of Romanian singers: Zinaida Pally, Nicolae Herlea, Ludovic Spiess, Cornel Stavru, Ion Buzea, Dan Iordăchescu, Elena Cernei. When I finished the Conservatory in 1969 and entered a prestigious institution like the Romanian Opera in Bucharest, this golden pleiad of the Romanian Opera compelled me to reach their level, and I think I had a beautiful career. (...) I performed in over 250 shows of *Tosca*, I covered the dramatic soprano repertoire. Sometimes, I performed the role of Leonora in *Fidelio* alongside *Tosca*, I sang Wagner-*Lohengrin*, *Tannhäuser*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Andrea Chénier*, *Gioconda* with which I debuted in 1983 with great success in America, after which I returned to San Francisco where I did three productions in the opera *La forza del destino*. In Romania, I made records and always came back home.” (Ocolișan Baba, 2020)

Alongside these refined stylistic-musical interpretations, which remain timeless, are the prominent names that Mrs. Slătinaru Nistor guided during their academic formation, names dedicated today to the lyrical stage and higher music education: Irina Iordăchescu, soloist at the National Opera in Bucharest, Valentina Naforniță, winner of numerous prestigious vocal interpretation competitions and a leading soloist at the Vienna Opera, mezzo-soprano Oana

Andra Ulieriu, soloist at the National Opera in Bucharest and a multiple award-winning interpreter at international singing competitions, Laura Nicorescu Houssain, Roxana Briban, Iulia Maria Dan, mezzo-soprano Roxana Constantinescu, also a soloist at the National Opera in Bucharest.

In the same confession interview with Ileana Ocolişan Baba, Maria Slătinaru Nistor talks about her work in academia, her closeness to the young voices she works with, initiating them into the mysteries of vocal art and integrating them into the great family of good music:

“(…) during my time as a student, I benefited from certain scholarships, from paid trips for international competitions. Now, in democracy, children have to sponsor their own trips, find someone to help them contact an impresario. But the most important moment, of course, is diligent work, as many foreign languages as possible, and a vast general culture. So, it's not just about the voice, but above all, everything related to music. In my class, I have 11 students. I only work with female voices. My girls who graduated already have a brilliant career. One of the candidates in this competition is Oana Andra Ulieriu, a very young mezzo-soprano, has a contract in England, won a prize in Munich and in several international competitions, completed directing studies and I predict a very beautiful career for her. The other candidate is a third-year student, with a superb voice. I'm always there for them at concerts, at auditions we conduct, I am like a mother to them, I can say. We have perfect harmony in class, with respect, and everything flows harmoniously and beautifully.” (Ocolişan Baba, 2020).

These are great names that have confirmed through their work with their teacher, in the true tradition of the Romanian singing school, carrying the cross, the longing, and the fulfillment of having once started this story about music from the north of the country, from the city of Eminescu's linden trees and Junimea meetings, from Creangă's fairytale, from many poets, painters, and writers... from Iaşi; and the cradle from which this story about a masterful voice knew to crown itself with laurels, fulfilling her prestigious activity with the title of *Doctor Honoris Causa* of UNAGE in 2016, for the services rendered to Music, promoting Romanian and universal values, living under the specter of beauty, a life dedicated to art.

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