

## Expressionist tendencies in the Romanian opera in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

PhD. Lecturer **Loredana Iațșen**  
(University of Arts “George Enescu”, Iasi)

Expressionism in Romanian music in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not a novelty, because of the meticulous musicological research belonging to **Clemansa Liliana Firca**. We list the sections devoted to the particular manifestation of this orientation in the volumes *Directions in the Romanian Music (1900-1930)*, *Modernity and Avant-garde in the Pre- and Inter-war Music (1900-1940)* or the study *Resonances of Expressionism Esthetics in the Romanian Musical Creation*, which proved phenomenon's viability in certain creations of the orchestral (suite), scenic (ballet) sphere, and whose echoes were partially felt in the opera genre.

Starting from the researcher's pertinent remarks, this article aims at highlighting the adaptation of the European current features in the Romanian scenic area in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the line of the exaggerated realism in *The Misfortune* (Sabin Drăgoi, 1927), of Igor Stravinski's influence with his *stille barbaro* veiled in *A Stormy Night* (Paul Constantinescu, 1934), to the musical-dramatic peculiarities which attest the *sublimated expressionism* of *Oedipus* masterpiece (George Enescu, 1931)<sup>1</sup>.

Even if the genre is treated in a different thematic and sonorous approach – drama (*The Misfortune* by Sabin Drăgoi), and comedy (*A Stormy Night* by Paul Constantinescu) – Caragiale's dramaturgy represents an unifying element, impressing specific features to libretto's modeling, with psychological or humoristic, parody, sarcastic valences. If in the first one the inspiration area contains a latent Expressionism, by accentuating the subjectivity of the late Romanticism, the sonority being impregnated by the national character, the comedy (*A Stormy Night*) gets distinguished by direct or indirect correspondences in the relationship libretto-music, because the high-spirited thematic – the Romanian suburb by means of agitated gestures or staring colors – sometimes require a violent musical language.

### Expressionist tendencies in Sabin Drăgoi opera – *Năpasta* (*The Misfortune*)

Referring to *Năpasta* (*The Misfortune*) opera by Sabin Drăgoi, structured in 3 acts, inspired by Caragiale's psychological drama, we can notice that characters' conflict is not the only one which contributes to highlighting tension, there is also action concentration at temporal level, this one taking place in one

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<sup>1</sup> Clemansa Liliana Firca, DIRECȚII ÎN MUZICA ROMÂNEASCĂ (DIRECTIONS IN THE ROMANIAN MUSIC) (1900-1930) (Bucharest: Ed. Muzicală, 1974), p. 153.

night only. Characters' obvious contrast allows sometimes their association with models belonging to the antic theatre area. It is the case of Anca – protagonist in Caragiale's drama – who, by the gradual amplification of the desire of revenging her dead husband, can be framed in the complex feminine typology of the antic tragedy, personifying Elektra in the moments of sufferance concretization. On his turn, Ion, central figure in the opera, reveals according to Nicolae Rădulescu the idea that “madman would be a sacred being, tragically and hieratically, brilliant in his humanity aura”<sup>2</sup>.

Even if in the realistic tendencies of popular musical drama it was compared to *Boris Godunov* (Modest Mussorgski) or to *Jenůfa* (Leoš Janáček), by the delineation of the grey ambiance of the Czech opera – rural environment, evil faith, strong passion conflicts – *The Misfortune* remains a national original scenic work with romantic sonorities and realistic libretto, the problematic of which approaches it to Expressionism.

### **Expressionist tendencies in Paul Constantinescu opera - *O noapte furtunoasă* (*A stormy night*)**

It is well known that the expressionist esthetic and sonorous features found in the Romanian works have not the force of developing at European level, these ones getting distinguished more as a modeling in the sense of breaking a music, whose popular or psalm sources form a different spirituality. Moreover, in order to understand some peculiarities of Expressionism in the Romanian music, Theodor W. Adorno in *Philosophie de la nouvelle musique* offers a suitable idea: “From a social point of view” – states Adorno – “grotesque is usually the form which makes acceptable the alienated and avant-garde things. The bourgeois is ready to approve modern art provided that this one assures him by its very form that it should not be taken seriously”<sup>3</sup>.

Compared to the national verismo with expressionist tendencies, derived from the correspondence between the accentuated realism of librettos and the folkloric character of the mentioned opera's sonority, *A Stormy Night* in Caragiale version - Constantinescu proposes, under the influence of Igor Stravinski with his soft *stille barbaro*, different features of the objector current. They can be interpreted as adaptations of some esthetic categories exploited by Stravinski in certain moments of creation, which delineates mainly Romanian music Expressionism, having as background the “grotesque comic, caricature and parody”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Nicolae Rădulescu, SABIN V. DRĂGOI (Bucharest: Ed. Muzicală , 1971), p. 117

<sup>3</sup> Theodor, W. Adorno, *Philosophie de la nouvelle musique*, p. 164, apud. Clemansa Liliana Firca, DIRECȚII ÎN MUZICA ROMÂNEASCĂ (DIRECTIONS IN THE ROMANIAN MUSIC) op. cit., p. 139.

<sup>4</sup> Clemansa Liliana Firca, op. cit., p. 133.

As a matter of fact, there are obvious aspects in the autochthon programmatic and scenic creation inspired from comedy universe, which appeared as a reaction to the post-romantic or impressionist esthetics, but mainly to national music's conventionalism. We can notice a concentration on language elements – used ironically or in charge spirit: cited from the vocal urban and instrumental-fiddler folklore, the call to Oriental, fanfare or entertaining music, the alternation of rhythms from the cultivated European source with the ones specific to the Romanian folklore, colored orchestral sonority, resulted from deliberately discrepant timber overlapping, etc.

As follows, we will focus on a couple of elements regarding the relationship between Caragiale fruity text and the novel sonority of Paul Constantinescu in the masterpiece belonging to social satire musical theatre, *A Stormy Night*.

In order to transpose in sounds the intrigue proposed by the dramatist – of suburb politicians' demagogy and mediocrity – in a derided form, Paul Constantinescu preserves work's comic sense, dynamism and structural hardness, adapted to the knowledge of epoch music, popular, Oriental, salon elements.

Musical work's dynamism imposes to the composer to concentrate the action, even modifying words order in Caragiale text, and improvisations in dramatist's spirit. These are aspects which lead to characters' vocal and scenic delineation, because of a recitative similar to Caragiale language, the correspondent of which is a particularly plastic sonority from a melodic, harmonic and orchestral point of view. We mention the music from *Iunion*, whose suburb sentimentalism is derided by a melodic line with shakes, appoggiaturas, syncopated rhythms, glissandos in orchestration, elements reflecting the absurd situation of certain characters overflowing with ridicule energy.

**Example no. 1** (11m. of the introduction)

The image displays two systems of musical notation for a piano introduction. The first system is titled "Allegro con fuoco" with a tempo marking of "♩ = 100". It begins with a piano dynamic and a "cresc." (crescendo) instruction. The music is in 2/4 time and features a complex, rhythmic melody in the right hand and a more regular accompaniment in the left hand. The second system continues the piece with similar rhythmic patterns and dynamic markings, showing a mix of chords and melodic lines.

Harmony and orchestration are not subject to the symphonic treatment, but to the dramatic principle, according to the sonority specific to the characters in the opera: Veta is recognized by waltz, canzonets and Zița by harmonically and timber distorted romances. We can notice that the heroes are highlighted by staring sonorous colors. We remember the episode when Zița appears on the stage thunderstruck after the fight with her ex husband and reads a letter received from him (scene 7). The musical ensemble offers a mixed sonority, the orchestration being obtained by means of the wooden instruments, pizzicato and chord, piano and triangle flageolets, together with the sordine trumpet. Of musicologists' remarks – Clemansa Liliana Firca, Anatol Vieru, Vasile Tomescu – regarding the correspondence between text and music in *A Stormy Night* opera, we keep in mind that Paul Constantinescu composed a musical comedy in the neoclassical area, which contains expressionist accents, on the line of the expressive increase of the critical realism.

### **Expressionist tendencies in *Oedipus* opera by George Enescu**

Of the multiple research performed for understanding this masterpiece, concluded by studies and volumes signed by Octavian Lazăr Cosma, Wilhelm G. Berger, Doru Popovici, Grigore Constantinescu etc. we discovered either analytical comments regarding composer's contact with the European tendencies (Postromanticism, Impressionism), either detailed remarks on modalism valorization in all its intonations (melisms, ornaments, glissandos, accompaniments, non-temperate intonations), which attest the framing of this work in the Romanian music.

In the opinion of the authors mentioned above, the partial manifestation of Expressionism in *Oedipus* provoked several debates. It is the case of Doru Popovici, who stopping in one of the chapters of *Introdúcere în opera contemporană (Introduction to Contemporary Opera)* on opera's musical language, regarding monody, heterophony, polyphony, rhythm, timbrality – remarks that: “The sober and reserved content of this opera has nothing in common with the loose evolution of the romantic creators, not to mention Viennese expressionists' concern”<sup>5</sup>.

On his turn Grigore Constantinescu in the volume *Orpheus Song* offers a poetic, intensely spiritualized comment about the tensed atmosphere in the *plague scene* (3<sup>rd</sup> act) from the point of view of an exaggerated Romanticism, avoiding its affiliation with Expressionism. Concerned about the comparison between the initial tragedy of Sophocles and its subsequent vision, Radu Gheciu, in the paper *How Opera Was Born Out of Tragedy* frames in an indirect manner, by means of his remarks, the amendments imposed by the librettist in the 3<sup>rd</sup> act in the sphere of an intention expressionism. As opposed to the other

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<sup>5</sup> Doru Popovici. INTRODUCTION TO THE CONTEMPORARY OPERA (Facla Publishing House, 1974), p. 162.

musicologists, Clemansa Liliana Firca in *Directions in the Romanian Music* exceeds the immediate plan of the literary text, considering that music does not ensure only libretto fund, but it intensifies its mysterious, painful meanings, “its eventual affinities with Expressionism representations universe, with its inclinations for telluric, for the mythical past”<sup>6</sup>.

Stopping on some tense moments from the dramatic culmination scenes – the dialog between the Sphinx and Oedipus and Sphinx death (2<sup>nd</sup> act, 3<sup>rd</sup> tableau), people’s lamentations in the scene of the plague which infests Thebes, Oedipus’s blindness scene, (3<sup>rd</sup>act) – the author explains, on the line of the structural-expressive thickening of intonation and vocal special effects (quarter tone, glissando, *Sprechghesang*, parlando, shout), the so-called “alienation expressionist complex”<sup>7</sup>. The researcher considers that these vocal moments frame in the imagination scope. Expanding the psychoanalytic aspects specific to Viennese Expressionism in the area of language chromatic evolution, we can notice that Viennese *Sprechghesang* valorization in the vocal procedures of *Oedipus* create “the specifically expressionist alienation effect”<sup>8</sup>. Associated with the expressionist shout, this effect has different meanings in the European scenic context of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the morbid loneliness in *Erwartung* and the psychoanalytical approach in *Elektra*, to the self-knowledge feeling, to the image of truth in *Oedipus*.

An interesting thing is represented by the analytical remarks of Myriam Marbé of the ample monograph dedicated to the composer, on the dramatic action culmination in 3<sup>rd</sup> act, achieved by means of certain “pre-serial elements”<sup>9</sup>, which reveal approaches to Alban Berg language. We refer to the dialogue between Oedipus and Jocasta, where the protagonist approaches the fatal truth. The musical discourse develops by sounds concentrations which are not distributed anymore as structures of a particular mode, but in the form of some sections which compose a scale of 11 sounds – *natural la, natural mi, natural si, sol, natural mi, natural fa, natural do, fa#, re, do#, natural si*.

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<sup>6</sup> Clemansa Liliana Firca, DIRECTIONS IN THE ROMANIAN MUSIC , op.cit., p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem., p.142

<sup>8</sup> Idem.

<sup>9</sup> Mircea Voicana, Clemansa Firca, Alfred Hoffman, Elena Zottoviceanu. In collaboration with: Myriam Marbe, Ștefan Niculescu and Adrian Rațiu, GEORGE ENESCU: MONOGRAFIE (MONOGRAPHI). Coordinator: Mircea Voicana (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei R. S. R., 1971), p. 812

**Example no. 2** (3<sup>rd</sup> act, reference point 256 + 3m.)

The image shows a musical score for Example no. 2. It consists of several staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics in French: "OEDIP, o Oreste, non guardate lo Rege" and "En Pho.ci de, Ai". Below it is another vocal line with lyrics: "lans quel pa-ys? Quand? Réponds! Quand?". The piano accompaniment is shown in two staves below. The score includes tempo markings such as "Pochiss. meno lento (♩=50)" and "animando - - - a T? sost. (♩=42)". Dynamic markings include "ppp", "ppp cresc.", "p", and "pp". There are also performance instructions like "ppp sub." and "poco".

Pascal Bentoiu in *Enescu's Masterpieces* also mentions the “tonal or rather atonal imponderability”<sup>10</sup>, with regard to the sonority at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> tableau (2<sup>nd</sup> act), whose strange expression is indirectly associated with the expressionist ambiance and language. Even if the long acordic pedals, tetra chords mixtures, successive harmonic structures oscillate between consonance and dissonance (seventh, none, undecim); these overlapping create an ambiguous sonority, the anxiety atmosphere being accentuated by the pregnant timber of the trumpets which intonate Sphinx’s melodic idea.

**Example no. 3** (3<sup>rd</sup> act, 2<sup>nd</sup> tableau, reference point 137 + 2m.)

The image shows a musical score for Example no. 3. It consists of several staves. The top staff is a vocal line with lyrics in Italian: "Ei. Hb. Pp. Trp." and "senza espress.". Below it is another vocal line with lyrics: "Ei. alto C.A. Trp." and "senza rigore". The piano accompaniment is shown in two staves below. The score includes tempo markings such as "a Tempo (♩=85)" and "poco sost.". Dynamic markings include "ppp" and "senza espress.". There are also performance instructions like "senza rigore" and "sforzandi".

The same author gradually captures the tragedy in the 3<sup>rd</sup> act, the moments when the truth is revealed to Oedipus being indicated with the names of the successive interlocutors: Creon, Tiresias, Jocasta, Phorbas, the Shepherd. Analyzing in a concentrated manner the relationship between text and sonority within each stage of dramaturgic accumulation, from a rhythmic, melodic, harmonic, orchestral point of view, Pascal Bentoiu concludes the remarks for the 3<sup>rd</sup> act, insisting upon the fact that tension progression was achieved beyond the

<sup>10</sup> Pascal Bentoiu, *CAPODOPERE ENESCIENE (ENESCU'S MASTERPIECES)*, (Bucharest: Ed. Muzicală, 1984), p. 269.

libretto, mainly through music, by delineating the ascendant moments towards catastrophe and intensity decreases, from the climax to the end.

Another important aspect which concerned musicologists with regard to Enescu's *Oedipus* is the heterophony. We refer to the study *Heterophony in <Oedipus> as a paradoxical category between similar and different*, realized by **Micaela Cananica Fulea** from an analytical-esthetic perspective. The author comments this element specific to Enescu's language, insisting upon certain scenic moments with dense emotional charge, considered as expressionist. As opposed to Oedipus song – *Il est breuvage* - where heterophony is revealed in the timber, Sphinx section gets distinguished by the amplification of this procedure at the level of all parameters.<sup>11</sup>

On his turn, analyzing the diversity of movement indications in the study (*Tempo Fluctuation in Oedipus Opera*) by **George Enescu**, **Dan Voiculescu** signals the „unique situation where tempo becomes ad libitum”. It is the moment of maximum tension – the cry of Oedipus, *Soleil, tu vois mes yeux pour la dernière fois!* (3<sup>rd</sup> act), framed by two agitated sections, developed in *Animato strepitoso* (quarter note = 144) – reference point 288<sup>12</sup>.

Beyond the expressiveness of language elements, which have the role of creating the fragmented image of the Protestant current, the signification complex of Enescu masterpiece derives, according to Clemansa Liliana Firca, of myth's extraordinary suggestion force, *of the anxiety arising from the failure to find out its eternal mystery [...] the resulting tenseness constituting perhaps the very essence of the sublimated Expressionism in Oedipus*<sup>13</sup>.

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### Abstract

Expressionism in Romanian music in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is not a novelty, because of the meticulous musicological research belonging to **Clemansa Liliana Firca**. We list the sections devoted to the particular manifestation of this orientation in the volumes *Directions in the Romanian Music (1900-1930)*, *Modernity and Avant-garde in the Pre- and Inter-war Music (1900-1940)* or the study *Resonances of Expressionism Esthetics in the Romanian Musical Creation*, which proved phenomenon's viability in certain creations of the orchestral (suite), scenic (ballet) sphere, and whose echoes were partially felt in the opera genre.

Starting from the researcher's pertinent remarks, this article aims at highlighting the adaptation of the European current features in the Romanian scenic area in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the line of the exaggerated realism in *The Misfortune* (Sabin Drăgoi, 1927), of

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<sup>11</sup> Michaela Caranica Fulea, "Heterophony in <Oedipus> as a paradoxical category between similar and different", in "GEORGE ENESCU" MUSICOLOGY INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM OF 2001 (Bucharest: Ed. Institutului Cultural Român, 2005), p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Voiculescu, "Tempo Fluctuation in Oedipus Opera by George Enescu", in **Musicology Studies**, 2001-2003 (Ed. Institutului Cultural Român), p. 93.

<sup>13</sup> Clemansa Liliana Firca, op.cit., p. 153.

Igor Stravinski's influence with his *stille barbaro* veiled in *A Stormy Night* (Paul Constantinescu, 1934), to the musical-dramatic peculiarities which attest the *sublimated expressionism* of *Oedipus* masterpiece (George Enescu, 1931)<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Clemansa Liliana Firca, DIRECȚII ÎN MUZICA ROMÂNEASCĂ 1900-1930 (DIRECTIONS IN THE ROMANIAN MUSIC) (Bucharest: Ed. Muzicală, 1974), p. 153.