
The relevance of context in musicological interpretation. Hermeneutical applications on certain Romanian writings and works

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Abstract: We have been perceiving ever more acutely for the past two decades a major change in the vision and musicological style in the Romanian language: language analysis and historiographic research have slid onto a secondary plane, while the commentary of the work, of its interpretation and the characterisation of the style, determined by the social, political, biographical, artistic factors, by the means of expression of the time focus researchers' interest increasingly. The history of contemporary musicology recognises the moment of change of the thinking paradigm in the 1980s writings belonging to Joseph Kerman: the article *How we got into Analysis, and How to Get Out* and the volume *Contemplating Music*. The author criticises the formalism and positivism which define musicology, identified with musical analysis, reveals its ideological nature, as the relation between analysis and organicity is the leading ideology. The American musicologist pleads for a more cultural form of musical criticism, supported by the exposure of the context and of the sources of the work objectified. According to Kerman, musicology had become more discursively-critical and less positivist (so-called scientific), being more preoccupied with interpretation than with information on the writing details and historical data; it had reconquered its interdisciplinary valences and envelopped all musical genres. Analysing the effects of this direction on the Romanian musicological discourse, we do two case studies: 1. the recent collective work *Noi istorii ale muzicii românești* [New histories of Romanian types of music], coordinated by Valentina Sandu-Dediu and Nicolae Gheorghiiță in the direction of emphasising and/or cancelling the effects of (nationalistic, socialist-realist) ideology on the value judgement of the anthologised musical and creative phenomena; 2. the musical comedy *Amorul doctor* [Dr. Love] by Pascal Bentoiu, regarded from the perspective of the relation between the artistic value and the cultural trajectory broken by the obscurity of Romanian society in the first half of the 1960 decade.

Keywords: musicology; hermeneutics: *Noi istorii ale muzicilor românești* [New histories of Romanian types of music]; Pascal Bentoiu; *Amorul Doctor* [Dr. Love].

1. Introduction

We have been perceiving ever more acutely for the past two decades a major change in the vision and musicological style in the Romanian language. The new manner manifests itself in the two major fields of musical research,

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structural analysis and the history of musical culture. The analysis of language and form of the score, of the work considered as an autonomous artistic product has slid onto a secondary plane – as the interpretation of its meanings, by rediscovering the atmosphere of ideas in which it was created, performed or received interests study authors, professional readers and music lovers. On the other hand, the discourse on history has changed, cataloguing and systematising old documents, the authors' biography but also the stylistic definition of individual works ceded the primary place to the reassessment of the social, political, biographical, artistic factors, which stimulated or discouraged musical expression. In the new design of the two musicological disciplines – analysis and history – the research and reinterpretation of the context becomes vital.

2. Renewals in the musicology of the 1980s and subsequently

The history of contemporary musicology recognises the moment of change of the thinking paradigm in the 1980s writings belonging to Joseph Kerman: the article *How we got into Analysis, and How to Get Out* and the volume *Contemplating Music* (Beard & Gloag, 2016, p. XV). In the two writings, much commented on and rediscovered by the musicology of the 2000s (less in Romania), Kerman criticises the formalism and positivism which define the research in the German area of the first half of the 20th century, taken over methodically after the war by Anglo-American writers.

By positivism we understand a way of reflecting the world and a concept of knowledge and interpretation, which has to be validated only through obvious, objective evidence (Beard & Gloag, 2016, p. 197). In the light of this Enlightenment concept, historical musicology deals with facts, verified documents analysed rationally on the basis of material evidence. Thus, musicologists do not speak about the aesthetic experience of perceiving music. “When the study of music histories loses touch with the aesthetic core of music, which is the subject matter of criticism, it can only too easily degenerate into a shallow exercise” – Joseph Kerman warns (1985, p. 19). Only the exercise of interpreting the historical musical fact by correlating the universe of ideas, of information tangent to the work and the texting of one's own experience of perceiving the work leads to good understanding, to an inspired, inspiring musicological discourse.

The preconceived idea that musicologists have to bracket their own subjectivity would be shaken even more insistently by visions expressed subsequently, in the 2000s. We retain an example: Jean-Jacques Nattiez. Through the published studies and the concept impressed upon the vast coordinated work – *Musiques. Une encyclopedie pour le XXI-e siècle* – the Canadian musicologist supports the idea that at present hermeneutical theories are influenced by a certain philosophical relativism, which opens the gate to limitless points of view: “la

signification ultime d'un texte ou d'une action est toujours différée, leur exégèse est infinie" (Nattiez, 2005, p. 59).

Joseph Kerman criticises vehemently the air-tight discourse of musical analysis. The American musicologist considers that the importance granted to language analysis in musical research all over the world has ideological determination, thereby understanding ideas with a force of conviction which were perpetuated through the years. He identifies the following lines of influence: the primordially of German instrumental music, which always remains a term of comparison, and, in this area, of absolute music, along the lines of Eduard Hanslick's aesthetics, which reduced meaning to the sonic form; the organicity of the work of art, an axiom which, paradoxically, has to be demonstrated in each analysis, not least, the scientific prestige of the analysis and of the analyst (Kerman, 1980, pp. 314-321). In his convincing discourse, Kerman condemns the closed character of musical analysis, concentrated on the internal structure of the work without openings towards history, communication, affect, text and programme, other works, etc. It must be stipulated, however, that his reaction was stimulated by the moment of radicalism of musical analysis in the decades 1950-1960, a moment associated through philosophy and method to the European avant-garde of those years marked by integral serialism and the insertion of mathematical models. That is why the author considers structuralist theory and analysis as "a spin-off of avant-garde composition", a derived product (Kerman, 1985, p. 61). Essentially, Joseph Kerman pleads for the replacement of the musical analysis on form and musical language with musical criticism – understanding thereby an interpretation of the meanings of the score with historical, philosophical, literary, biographical arguments.

Before passing on to the next section, I must stipulate that there was another factor which contributed to the change of vision in contemporary research: the transformation of ethnomusicology, a phenomenon treated scantily by the author under discussion. I'm referring to the advancement of the research of folkloric and traditional musics from the analysis of genre and form features to anthropological and cultural approaches, a direction initiated by Alan Merriam. An American academic, anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, Alan Merriam experimented through field research and reflected on the correct direction of the musicological approach: "music in culture" or "music as culture". Defined as a study of music within the culture it appeared in, the new ethnomusicology would influence general musical research, launching a new argument for the correct understanding and integration of context in the interpretation of artistic facts.

3. *Noi istorii ale muzicilor românești* [New histories of Romanian types of music] – recontextualisation, reinterpretation, reassessment

Analysing the effects of this direction on the Romanian musicological discourse, we do to case studies. The first lenses on the recent collective work

Noi istorii ale muzicilor românești [New histories of Romanian types of music], coordinated by Valentina Sandu-Dediu and Nicolae Gheorghiuță, published by Muzicală publishing house at the end of 2020 (Sandu-Dediu & Gheorghiuță, 2020). I have performed a detailed analysis of the vision, content, methods of research, which fundamented the vast research – two volumes summing up over 800 pages – and I have published an extensive article (Vasiliu, 2021), maybe too extensive for our natural wish to easily discover the essential. I return with this impulse and with new arguments.

Noi istorii ale muzicii românești (New histories of Romanian types of music) is not a spontaneous and singular approach but fulfills brilliantly and coherently the process of reassessment of our musical past, begun after 1990, concretised through published volumes and studies, through thematic conferences and projects initiated mostly by musicologists from Bucharest (Octavian Lazăr Cosma, Valentina Sandu-Dediu, Speranța Rădulescu, Costin Moisil, Nicolae Gheorghiuță). In the writings on this topic published in the past 30 years there took place successive stages of shedding the ideological crusts that decisively influenced the information content, the value judgements, the interpretative discourse. In the volumes we are commenting on now, the process of reassessing the Romanian musical history is advanced; neither was a banal cleansing of the texts from the formulations with a political substratum, nor simple identification and revelation of the ideological insertions in aesthetic judgement performed, but a reconsideration of the data and idea fund of each analysed stage and genre. This goal presupposed new accessing of confirmed documents and their novel interpretation, enriching the information by assimilating recent research and by studying the secret archives, which had recently become public.

What ideologies are we talking about? Naturally, centrally positioned is the communist ideology with its totalitarian stages, socialist-realist (1945-1965) and national-communist (1971-1989), which equally dictated and manipulated composition, interpretation and musicology. The authors also investigate the effects of the right-wing ideology in the interwar era, which culminated in the years of the royal and legionary dictatorships (1938-1941). But the red thread of the reassessment assumed by the author collective was sidelining the effects of the nationalist ideology, which affected the previous analyses of each musical era.

For a culture with the profile of the Romanian one, which experienced a long traditional and folkloric, including oral, stage and only entered the academic European environment at the middle of the 19th century, years when national ideas proliferated all over Europe, the tension between national and international is a natural phenomenon for a while. However, its rebirth under Ceaușescu's presidency in extreme forms such as protochronism also pushed ideology

towards flagrant misrepresentation of historical information and its interpretation.

In the light of these general considerations, which explain to a large extent the position of the author collective, who realised the work *Noi istorii ale muzicilor românești* [New histories of Romanian types of music], we present a few renewals of the content, which tend to essentially modify the image installed by formal education.

1. The relative antiquity of the manuscripts and prints with musical notation (extremely rarely attested before 1500), their number reduced to eight titles and, in some cases, the interpretation misrepresented by partial research or by national sentimentalism (*Codex Caioni*) is ascertained, as historians are recommended to stay with the proven data “And the rest [...] is silence.” (Sandu-Dediu & Gheorghită, 2020, p. 31). (Costin Moisil – *În loc de istorie a muzicii vechi românești* [In place of a history of old Romanian music])

2. The Phanariote era was a period of intense military, lay, religious musical practice – different from that of Europe. The presentation of the artistic phenomenon as it took place sidelines the traditional inferiority complex in relation to the European practices of the 18th century or the future assertion of Romanian music. (Nicolae Gheorghită – *Practici muzicale laice la curțile domnești și boierești din Valahia și Moldova în epoca fanariotă. 1711 – 1821* [Lay musical practices at the princely and boyar courts from Wallachia and Moldavia in the Phanariote era. 1711 – 1821])

3. In Transylvania, until the 18th century there was no Romanian music author, the old period, until 1690 can only be partially reconstructed for lack of direct testimonies, while the contribution of the organists attested in the archives from Brașov and Sibiu was exaggerated through the lack of thorough research of the extant scores/manuscripts. (Vlad Văidean – *Între cosmopolitism și localism – Etape premoderne ale culturii muzicale profesioniste în Transilvania (Secolele XVI – XVIII)* [Between cosmopolitanism and localism – Premodern stages of the professional musical culture in Transylvania. 16th – 18th centuries])

4. The composers of the 19th century were “amateurs rather than professionals [...] managing to reach the critical mass for the appearance of a truly significant figure – George Enescu” (Sandu-Dediu & Gheorghită, 2020, p. 190): Valentina Sandu-Dediu – *Începuturile compoziției românești, între naționalism și obsesia sincronizării cu Occidentul* [The beginnings of Romanian composition, between nationalism and the obsession of synchronising with the West].

5. The modernisation of social structures and of the way of life, the folklorisation imposed by the power and assumed by the people, the cultural globalisation through the media channels and the population’s migration to Western European countries, but not only, led to the disappearance of rural musics and to the blossoming of new urban musics. (Speranța Rădulescu –

Prefacerea muzicilor orale de-a lungul secolului XX [The change of oral types of music across the 20th century]

6. The Romanianisation of church music (of Byzantine tradition), a process carried out over the course of one and a half centuries, was stimulated and financially supported by the Romanian state, installing such categorical opinions that the new wave of Byzantine chanting inspired by the Greek style, in which “chanting” was “better” preserved is liked neither at an official level, nor by ordinary people. “Virtuosity has become a vice, while simplistic execution a virtue” – concludes the author Costin Moisil (Sandu-Dediu & Gheorghită, 2020, p. 235) (Costin Moisil – *Construind o muzică bisericească națională* [Building a national church music])

The selection of significant ideas and contributions could continue but no summary replaces the individual read we recommend. At the end of the considerations on the research *Noi istorii ale muzicilor românești* (New histories of Romanian types of music), we emphasise a further two general ideas: all musical genres are investigated – Byzantine, folkloric, military, academic, jazz, entertainment – in virtue of the openness offered in the framework of contemporary ethnomusicology; 2. the new points of view result both from the research/reassessment of the facts/documents and from the assimilation of the ideas formulated by contemporary historians like Neagu Djuvara, Vlad Georgescu, Șerban Papacostea, Lucian Boia a. o. – as the approach of the phenomenon is interdisciplinary.

4. *Amorul doctor* [Dr. Love] – the context of the work vs. the context of reception

The second case study meant to support the importance of revealing the context in musicological discourse is the presentation of the opera *Amorul doctor* [Dr. Love] by Pascal Benteoiu, with a stress on the relation value – promotion. Benteoiu wrote this work in 1963 after ca. a decade of compositional career, as the approached genre surprised many at that time: no sign was perceived in the artist’s previous preoccupations to announce his launching into lyrical theatre through a musical comedy. In recent years he had made himself known with the symphonic poem *Luceafărul* [The Morning Star], he had had outstanding success with his concert scores, two for piano, one for violin – performed on Bucharest stages. Upon researching the biographical information, to the extent they are inserted in his wife, Annie Benoiu’s memoirs, we discover the beneficial influence exerted by his friend of that period – Nicu Horodniceanu, a future dramaturge, who discovered and stimulated still young (35-36 years old) Pascal Benteoiu’s theatrical-musical skills (Benteoiu, 2006, pp. 630-631). A first sign is his own writing of the libretto after Molière’s text through a rational concentration of the original play.

Neither was the choice of Molière's play for his first opera accidental. Pascal Bentoiu's education formed him in the direction of cultivating classical values, while his preference for comedy at that moment in his life can be regarded as a way of surpassing the tragedy experienced in the last fourteen years – years of his father, lawyer Aurelian Bentoiu's political detention, who had passed away in prison just a year before.

An attractive and contemporary musical comedy in the 1960s through the use of entertainment music popular at the time (North and South American rhythms), diverse stylistic allusions overlaid onto a modern academic sonic background, Bentoiu's *opera buffa* maintains its charm and freshness upon current reception. The composer's capacity of theatrical-musical expression in the comic area (humour, satire, parody, ludic), the masterful use of all means of the genre found at the confluence between European comic opera and the Anglo-American musical fundamentals its situation among masterpieces. The terzetto Sganarelle – Lucinda – Lisetta from Scene 1 (Bentoiu, 1970, reference 12), can be a relevant example: an ingenious, modern rhythmic polyphony with airy percussion and orchestration.

The use of dance rhythms current in those years (cha-cha, boogie-woogie, twist), quoting popular melodies (*Valencia*, *Eu passant par la Lorraine*), languishing intonations of Puccinian opera and their processing in various degrees of concreteness, every time in a parodic key, reflect the author's artistic option. It can be explained through his previous experience gained as a composer of stage music, including the comedies "The Marriage of Figaro" (Beaumarchais), 1955, "The Bourgeois Gentleman" (Molière), 1960, made by greatly talented directors like Vlad Mugur and Lucian Giurchescu. (We stipulate that Bentoiu, being a free-lancer, earn his living by writing stage music – a genre not taken into account at that time by the professional authority in Romania). But it is also the expression of the author's musical preferences – we remember the jazz influences in his first opera (*Sonata for piano*, *Concert Overture*) and we take into consideration his attraction for the American culture, which was experiencing a period of maximum blossoming of the musical through the works of recent years: *My Fair Lady* by Loewe, *West Side Story* by Bernstein.

The work enjoyed the appreciation of the Composers' Union right from the acquisition, as Bentoiu received the State Prize for the year 1964 (Cosma, 1995, p. 378). Nevertheless, no great publicity was made regarding the score. The reason was definitely nationalistic in nature: the style of the work contrasted with the main direction in the works of Romanian musical theatre: the historical drama (Gheorghe Dumitrescu – *Ion Vodă cel Cumplit* [John III the Terrible], *Decebal* [Decebalus], *Răscoala* [The Mutiny] or operetta with folkloric influences (Filarei Barbu – *Ana Lugojana* [Ana from Lugoji]; Nicolae Kirculescu – *N-a fost nuntă mai frumoasă* [No other wedding was more beautiful]; Gherase Dendrino – *Lăsați-mă să cânt* [Let me play], etc.) We deduce that this was the reason why

Pascal Bentoiu's score was staged belatedly, almost three years later, on 23 December 1966, in a performance of the Romanian Opera, coupled with Paul Constantinescu's *A Stormy Night* and was resumed only once, in 1967, at the 4th edition of the "George Enescu~ Festival (Popovici, 1974, p. 173). The comedy *Amorul doctor* [Dr. Love] had a very warm welcome from musical criticism, authors like Ada Brumaru, Viorel Cosma, Alfred Hoffman, J. V. Pandelescu, Radu Gheciu, George Sbârcea, V. Popescu-Deveselu commenting in various dailies the musical-theatrical quality of the lyrical performance.

My observation on the score reveals to me the value stage of the composition. Even if it processes entertainment rhythms, introduces fashionable hits, the professional-musical level of the score is very high, with Romantic-modern orchestral writing (having an extended percussion ensemble), with varied vocal sections, containing many moments of virtuosity and creating a perfect individualisation of the characters: "a work, which can represent us at the level of modern opera performances~, as Grigore Constantinescu appreciated in his study subsequent to the premiere (1974, p. 142). Nevertheless, the performance was not kept in the repertoire of the Romanian opera, as it was resumed only once after the premiere representations. The criticism to the first performance suggested the necessity of improvement through supplementary rehearsals and the rhythmicity of reruns, which did not happen anymore. In the years that followed, Pascal Bentoiu, in his new position of member in the leadership of the Composers' Union would have the opportunity to travel abroad, an opening also capitalised on by having the work recorded by the BBC in 1969. Sung in English, the work claims once again its origin in modern European opera influenced by the *musical*¹. Bentoiu's achievement of having had his work recorded by the BBC was overlooked. There is a single mention in the magazine *Muzica* (Music) of that year, authored by Florian Lungu (1969); Iosif Sava also reacted passingly in an article referring to the repertoire of the opera, by writing "Pascal Bentoiu's opera, *Amorul doctor* [Dr. Love], a work, which enjoyed phenomenal success in England but which is so rarely programmed in Bucharest" (Cosma, 2017, p. 11). In fact, it was not being programmed at all and the critic's delicate warning had no effect.

Fortunately, there is the Romanian version, recorded by the Electrecord label much later (in 1983) with the orchestra of the Philhamornic from Iași led by Ion Baci and a remarkable national cast: Gheorghe Roșu, Sandra Șandru, Florin Diaconescu, Agnes Condraș and the Iași artists Corneliu Solovăstru, Constantin Axinte and Mihai Axinte. In the chronicle of the performance held the following year by the same ensemble in Iași, music critic Liliana Gherman was observing the restraint towards promoting the work. "The posters kept a

¹ The English version of the opera *Amorul Doctor* [Dr. Love], recorded at the BBC, was conveyed to me by Pascal Bentoiu in 2005. It was not edited on disc.

totally inopportune discretion~ – the author expressed herself with the tact required by the political atmosphere of the time, restraint which appeared in total contrast with the value of the manifestation, verbalised thus: “An exceptional artistic achievement [...] remarkably efficient sonic dramaturgy; perfect adaptation of the music to the goal”. (Gherman, 2003, p. 157).

At the end of these considerations on the context of composing, interpreting and promoting the opera *Amorul doctor* [Dr. Love] by Pascal Bentoiu (in which I have avoided the presentation of musical analysis), I wish to remark the author’s perseverance in fulfilling his artistic project, a sign of an evolved creative conscience, which can overcome obstacles and look for alternative solutions. Not accidentally, he continued to compose in the opera genre, amplifying his international success and finally conquering the Romanian stage through the long career of the performance *Hamlet*.

5. Conclusions

The two case studies of my demonstration – the musicology work *Noi istorii ale muzicilor românești* [New histories of Romanian types of music] and the opera *Amorul doctor* [Dr. Love] are situated in different spheres, the first targets the configuration of a new vision on history through awareness of the effects of political ideology on study methods and the resulted ideas; the second explains the origin of the creative idea and the avatars of the artistic career of a score in the Romanian cultural environment marked by national obsessions. What binds them is the importance granted to context in musicological interpretation.

The analysed context has value only if it is intimately bound to the musical phenomenon, which we focus on. I have negative examples in mind – works in which the description of the era, the composer’s presentation and the analysis of the work are parallel discourses. This approach does not increase understanding, becoming a form without a background.

In the case of the discovery of an author’s stylistic traits, the context signifies the existence or creation of an image on all the works, the circulation of ideas and techniques from one work to the other; it imposes their relation to their contemporaries, obtained through the investigation of their contact with the types of writing of the moment, through education, social and professional life – thus requiring the close observation of the composer’s biography.

In the case of an analysis of a work, the supporting context is constituted, in the discovery of the sources of inspiration and the emphasis on the composer’s interests in the moment preceding his work, in the comparison with techniques used in the era and in their work, in recomposing the artistic career of the work (editions, interpretations).

In the case of researching and reconfiguring historical discourse, returning to documents, to testimony is just as useful as understanding the extra-musical complex of ideas – cultural theories, professional principles, ideologies of all

kinds – becoming aware of their decisive influence on interpreting information and the course of history.

Returning to Joseph Kerman and to his observation of 1985, that the study of the significance and value of the work of art, that is, what he calls musical criticism, is not explicitly featured in the world of musicology, in academic circles, being only used in concert chronicles, 40 years after the publication of his writings we ascertain the transformation of musicology, which has become more discursive-critical and less positivist, being preoccupied more with interpretation than with information on the writing details and historical data: musicology, which has reconquered its interdisciplinary valences and has enveloped all musical genres, thus opening itself to wider reception.

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