

Voices in Space or the Contemporary Realism in the Pedagogy of the Future Opera Singer

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Abstract: The Romanian opera and operetta repertoire is a constant objective in the Opera Class of the Faculty of Performing, Composition, and Musical Theoretical Studies in “George Enescu” National University of Arts from Iași. The stylistic diversity and the richness of the drama make not only an important instrument for the study out of it, but also a moral debt for the knowledge and transmission of a music whose beauty – once (re)discovered – is a source of enchantment for the artists, as well as for the public. If in the beginning of the professional route singing in the mother tongue facilitates the work and the study of the opera singer, over time this option may enter an ethic of the performer, happily completing his repertoire. Although one of our main goals is to guide the students, future opera singers, to gain and to develop their acting skills so as to be natural and convincing on stage, contemporary realism does not exclude experiments. Having this in mind and in order to make students’ work visible, we made an experimental video document, based on a first selection from our recitals, which is aimed to let the audience take a glance into the intimacy of our class study on Romanian opera and operetta, both from the musical and drama perspective. By changing the original objective – the entire presentation in semester exams of students’ classroom work – the fragmentary nature of the processing gives a certain dynamism to our work. Changing the purpose brings things to a new light, the artistic overbearing the pedagogical, and last but not least, the Romanian music proving that it supports an experimental treatment.

Keywords: Romanian repertoire, opera, operetta, opera acting, experimental video document.

1. Introduction

In the last years, the Opera Class of the Faculty of Performing, Composition and Musical Theoretical Studies from Iași has given an important place to the study of the Romanian music of opera and operetta. The Romanian heritage belonging to these genres is rich and varied, modern, but also with deep folk roots, and it might be beneficial if it were a permanent source of learning during the formative years of the future opera singers. This is what we tried to do, putting students in front of the musical and dramatic deciphering of some scores belonging to Romanian composers. Some of them are still in the

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manuscript stage and they have not been printed¹. That's why the thorough research was even more captivating, along with the discovery of the musical language, of the poetic or dramatic theme, of vocal issues, the charm of handwritten notes, in pencil, representing a special novelty for our curious students. In other cases, the young singers set off slightly disappointed because they didn't find a performance that would give them an initiating landmark, but the next stages of study revealed a beautiful music to them, not exactly easy to sing, but which drew them into its nets, and made them realize that it was worth the effort to make it known.

From the meditation on the musical art in *Întâlnire cu George Enescu* [Meeting with George Enescu] by Doru Popovici, up to the echoes of history and legend in *Decebal* by Gheorghe Dumitrescu, or *Horia* by Nicolae Bretan, and the psychological drama in *Năpasta* [The Plague] by Sabin Drăgoi, but also the irresistible comedy of *O Noapte furtunoasă* [A Stormy Night] by Paul Constantinescu, going through the lyricism of feelings in *Lăsați-mă să cânt* [Let me sing] by Gherase Dendrino, and culminating with the frothy trills in *Motanul încălțat* [Puss in Boots] by Cornel Trăilescu, the Romanian lyrical repertoire may be, through variety, complexity and beauty, a strong point of attraction both for students and professionals, and also for the wide audience.

Thus we came to reinterpret a selection from two pre-pandemic recitals of Romanian music (during which undergraduates and graduate students from the Opera Class sang accompanied on the piano by lecturer PhD Raluca Ehupov and assistant professor Laura Turtă-Timofte) and treat it with specific resources of video art (processing performed by lecturer PhD Andrei Cozlac), interventions that support or amplify the drama, the comedy or the lyricism of the musical moments. The result was a 16-minute movie, which, through the meeting between the diverse vocal matter, supported by the convincing acting of the performers, and a playful-current visual perspective, crosses the border into a contemporary form of expression, necessary in times under which the manifestations in the artistic fields are so different, always evolving and changing, and what is called *statement*, artistic intention expressed in words, has become a *must*.

The existing material² proved malleable and the experiment brought a new light on our work. The two recitals wanted to mark three important events: the Centenary of the Great Union, the celebration of the 160th anniversary of the Little Union, and the 100th anniversary of the official use of the Romanian language. On these occasions the singer students approached and came into contact with the Romanian opera, which in over 100 years of creative

¹ The operas *Întâlnire cu George Enescu* by D. Popovici and *Horia* by N. Bretan have not been published yet.

² Images were recorded by Ștefan Merlan.

accumulations offered to the genre not only world-renowned singers, but also very valuable opuses. Configured as *Lyrical Laboratories*, the student performance under whose cupola the Opera Class continued and developed the idea of presenting some show-type recitals unfolded in the “Eduard Caudella” Hall (Baş House), the first having the title *Pagini de operă românească* [Pages of Romanian Opera], and the second *Sonorități lirice românești* [Romanian Lyrical Sonorities].

2. Didactic aspects

In addition to the shows with better or less known titles, during which the students and master students have the possibility to sing, to act, and to build a character in its entire complexity, the recitals of the Opera Class come to complete and to diversify the didactic activity, enriching the singers’ repertoire with excerpts from opera, operetta, or musical (arias, duets, terzettos). These versions of performance are suitable for the years of study where the vocal composition is predominantly female (the most common are soprano voices), and the distribution of an opera cannot be fully covered. During musical excerpts the students express themselves vocally and theatrically, they reproduce the states of the played characters, they use objects, they move, gesture, dance, utter prose, interact with the other characters present on stage, and so they learn and experience life on stage. Another benefit of this type of performance is that there can be chosen and interpreted those musical numbers which best correspond to the vocal possibilities of each student, covering as many directions of the large field of study as possible.

In the Romanian repertoire the young artists can manifest themselves with the advantage of a direct understanding of the libretto, and the acting assumption is, from this point of view, not necessarily easier, but more natural. Taking the responsibility of the meaning of the words, as well as the accuracy of the articulation should be a benchmark they can use when singing in other languages. The technical and expressive elements related to the articulation and voice projection in Romanian should be the pattern in the utterance of the words and the diction (vowels and consonants). Of course, we can open an entire discussion about the necessity of approaching the Romanian repertoire in the study of singing, from artistic, technical, and spiritual points of view. We will not insist here on this aspect, but rather on the close connection between opera acting and musical interpretation.

The singing in the mother tongue makes students’ and educators’ work and study easier, considering “an opera is written starting from the libretto, never the other way around” (Soare, 2014, p. 180). Because there are no problems with pronunciation or comprehension of the literary text, the attention can be directed to others parameters of musical interpretation and opera acting, the coordination of all elements necessary for the raising of the

syncretic show proposing another centre of interest. This situation is beneficial for the singers at the beginning of their studies, who, as is natural, are concerned and focused on the physical process of singing, breathing and air support, posture of singing, phonation, the control of the abdominal wall, the position of the palate, of the larynx and the preparation for producing vocal sounds in the extreme registers. Without solving the vocal and musical issues and the comprehension of the dramatic context we cannot move to the next level: the investment in the character, the scenic movement, the use of the objects (of the props), the interaction with the other characters.

The project *Voices in space* is probing the area of the Romanian opera and operetta within the Opera Class and it has a double function: that of documenting at school the study of students (and ours), but also of bringing it to the public in a current form, more exciting, perhaps, namely in the experiment of the visual kind, following the idea to bridge the gap between the novel, the movie and the visual arts, where innovations are in a constant and engaging competition with tradition.

3. The world-wide repertoire versus the Romanian repertoire

Due to the great tradition of *bel canto*, an overwhelming part of the opera music that is currently sung on the world stages is written in Italian, which is understandable, so a whole singing technique was transmitted to perform this repertoire.

Between the era of the *popularization* of culture, when all scores were sung in Romanian, and that of *globalization*, approaching an overwhelmingly foreign repertoire (Italian, German, French, Russian, etc.), the study of Romanian music should occupy a training place, from the earliest stages of study (secondary and higher education), a place where the young singer concerned with the study of his voice should get acquainted with the whole issue of the syncretic genre, begin to know and to experiment the means of the scenic language, the principles of phonation and acting, gradually building his self-expression.

The Romanian melos and ethos deserve to be played and made known by Romanian performers, the deep understanding of the Romanian music being more difficult to expect from some musicians who come from another cultural space, and speak another language. If this is part of an ethic of the future opera singer even from the university years, the performing universe will thus contain a wealth that will happily complete the repertoire.

4. Musical Stopovers

For a shape that was intended to be as wide as possible, the musical pageant started from the chamber opera area, a subgenre preferred by some composers, starting with the second half of the twentieth century. Embodying

the singer character from the opera *Întâlnire cu George Enescu*, Bianca Sava brought on stage the music of Doru Popovici, a composer who focused mainly on chamber music in the second part of his creative activity. Composed in 2002 for soprano, bass, violin, piano, and mixed choir, *Întâlnire cu George Enescu*, which has the opus number 154, is in line with religious operas, inspired by Christ's precepts. Bianca Sava proved her understanding of the literary text and she conveyed the philosophical message, building a moment of inner tension, a prayer to the Moldavian Orpheus, during which she spoke about the mission of the art creator, and she emphasized "the correspondence between ethics and aesthetics" (Constantinescu, 2008, p. 311).

The musical fragments extracted from the historical operas demanded the performers strength in the rendering of the dramatic accents. From the wide repertoire of the historical opera we stopped at the operas *Decebal* by Gheorghe Dumitrescu and *Horia* by Nicolae Bretan. For the first case, the aria *Ah, soartă blestemată* [*Oh, cursed fate!*] from the end of the fourth act was sung by mezzosoprano Florena-Lucia Radu, with a powerful voice, being a melodic discourse distinguished by harrowing tragedy. From *Horia*, the opera of the freedom from within, the most well-known opus signed by Bretan, we stopped at the aria *Dați loc, creștini* [*Make room, Christians*] from the fourth act, the eighth scene, an aria which belongs to the character Ileana, daughter of Horia, and which was performed with passion and fervour by the ample voice of soprano Andreea Ghidu.

Remaining in the sphere of the national opera we slid lightly and naturally towards the popular drama created by Sabin Drăgoi, on a road that is not far away from the mussorgskyan experience. A thrilling image of the Romanian village from the end of the nineteenth century, *Năpasta* proposed two characters, Ion [John, the Madman] and Anca, both having an aria from the second act. Ion's aria *Nu dați, nu dați* [*Don't hit, don't hit*] from the scene of agony is one of the most tempting bass aria from the Romanian repertoire. The generous melodic with a beautiful *cantabile* requests a pliable and warm voice that can build up long phrases on *legato* and quiet nuances, making the natural transition from free *parlato*, to *arioso*, and to the aria itself. The young Ivan Dikusar reluctantly approached this complex aria, but from the staged study there resulted a successful interpretation, under which a noble and imposing voice with a special timbre is easily distinguished, a voice highlighted by acting which has already acquired a certain maturity, being able to transmit the moment of confusion, of physical and mental weakness of the character.

Along with the spinto voice of Maria Miler, the verismo accents of Drăgoi's music were heard. The aria *Vrea să plece* [*He wants to go*] illustrates a tenacious character, who lives in order to take revenge. Maria Miler stepped into the character's shoes with a lot of patience and intelligence, realizing a supple recitative, which turned into a song in some places, in passages of

arioso, the moments of tense drama bringing to the surface the potential of her voice (the volume and the penetrance).



Fig. 1 Maria Miler – S. Drăgoi, *Năpasta*, Anca's aria, second act

The next musical stopover took us to the end of the 19th century, when Neo-Greek culture was blooming and the melismatic style paid tribute to oriental influences. Paul Constantinescu's opera *O noapte furtunoasă* marked an important moment in the Romanian composition as the first musical comedy of universal scale, written in a modern, twentieth century style. The piece of work has artistic values due to its comic-dramatic effects unprecedented in our national creation. The short aria of Zița, *Angel Radios* [*Radiant Angel*], from the first act, was sung by soprano Diana-Elena Vornicu, who, with ease and ingenuity, shaped a colourful and vivid character. Reframing the atmosphere in Caragiale's play, Bianca Sava and Vlad Bîrgu got close to the love relationship between Veta and Chiriac in their study of the final duo of act one. The dramatic situation caught their attention so during rehearsal they enjoyed funny moments, trying to find the most appropriate gestures and movements for the interpretation of the provincial love scene, having at its centre the fake suicide of the male character. The public's reaction at their interpretation of the duo warmly rewarded the efforts of the two students.



Fig. 2 Bianca Sava and Vlad Bîrgu – P. Constantinescu, *O Noapte furtunoasă*, duet Veta-Chiriac, end of the first act

A sincere atmosphere with a melancholic touch was created by the sopranos Ioana Secu and Diana Claudia Bîlcu, who united their voices and energies in the duo between Martha Roth and Bertha Gorgon, which is a less played musical number, as in the economy of the *Lăsați-mă să cânt* show by composer Gherase Dendrinu this one is often skipped. The scene raised some difficulties for the young sopranos, as it begins in the romance genre proposing a series of markings of tempo modulations, rendering nuances more and more subtle, on notes which are not easy to reach (in the vocal passage and higher). Diana-Maria Urdeș conquered us with the charm of the waltz in Bertha's aria from act two of the same operetta. *Lăsați-mă să cânt* has at the core of its plot the composer Ciprian Porumbescu, whose beloved one was Bertha Gorgon, for whom he had the most special feelings and to whom he dedicated the song *Te iubesc... [I Love You...]*. The famous aria, simply intitled *You*, finds often place in the soprano repertoire, as it is very challenging for the lyrical voices. The performer stood for scenic intelligence, femininity and sensibility and the warmth of her voice went together in harmony with the intensely charming lyrical moment. Vlad Sîrbu joined Diana-Maria Urdeș to “continue” the love story between Ciprian and Bertha. The well-known duo *I Love You* in act two does not raise significant technical issues so the singer can focus on highlighting the most subtle vocal colours and communicating the inner feeling. This musical number has a special beauty, which is why it is present in recitals and concerts and students are magnetically attracted by the dramatic situation and clear melody. The two students' energies slowly came together as the male character entered the aura of warmth of the female character's soul. Their collaboration took place under good circumstances and Vlad Sîrbu, a tenor of fine musicality, gained interpretation skills and improved his scenic mobility.

In the end we reached the realm of children's opera, loved by both children and grown-ups. The tale of the naughty tomcat who uses countless tricks to obtain power, wealth and... the hand of a princess for his master interested not only theatre and movie directors, but also composers who having Perrault's tale as a starting point wrote remarkable operatic works. The *Motanul încălțat* opera written by Cornel Trăilescu became one of the longest-lived creations of The National Opera House in Bucharest's repertoire. Diana-Elena Vornicu sung the popular aria *Eu sunt Motanul Cotoșman* [*I Am The Puss in Boots*], from the end of act, a musical number which is often interpreted by light lyrical or coloratura sopranos. The alert *tempo*, the sharpness of vocal articulation, the overwhelming energy and the joyful interpretation can easily be remarked in Diana Vornicu's evolution, so we can say that this aria shed light both on her vocal and scenic qualities.

5. Contemporary Realism and the opera singer

Realism has crossed the ages and arts and remained alive, because it actually doesn't belong to the 19th century, but to Antiquity, through Aristoteles, who first put his finger on it naming it *mimesis*. The mirroring in images of ourselves is a need that arouse in the old ages and has been following us through our existence as a species. We feel the need to mirror the other but also to see *ourselves*, human beings, in the mirrors of art. Theatre – mimed, spoken, sung – brought in front of people distorted or embellished images, but vivid ones, images made by people, the most attractive then.

In the future singer-actor's pedagogy there are multiple layers of training, but all merge into the truthful way of playing a character, a scenic *persona*, by all means of sensibility and intelligence, of musical, acting and spiritual means gained along his formation process. The talk around what is contemporary in a theatrical performance led to the idea that *me*, who am thinking and living now, I play a part, through this single fact this becomes contemporary. No matter how hard I wished to change this, my spiritual and physical body is contemporary. So, assuming this already makes a Caragiale scene contemporary. Is it so simple? Basically, it is.

Musical language, the performance formula, the singing technique and style, a way of acting (a *manner* sometimes), a tempo – faster or slower – distinguishes an artistic movement from another. The style of a show may be psychological, symbolic, metaphorical, surrealistic and in many other ways, – the fundamentals of the show is *to play*, to embody a character, to assume situations, relations.

Therefore, at the foundation of a performance, whether it follows a tradition (singing or directing) there stays a certain form of realism. One cannot embody a character, no matter how strange or human he can be: whether it is a phantastical creature, a human or an animal, he will be taken by the actor as

his/ hers for the identification to happen. In a minimalistic performance, having as set just a backcloth, without or with few props, embodying characters, the intelligence and subtlety of nuances may sustain the interpretation which the director together with the conductor and the singers gave to an opera. So, this kind of performance requests at its centre *the presence* of the singer-actor.

In the quest of form there are still stages – and here comes the wish and need to bring things to an understanding and express them through contemporary means.

Switching our initial goal – the public presentation in semester exams of students' exercises –, the fragmentary character of this video processing gives a certain dynamism to our work. The change of the goal brings things into a new light, thus the artistic prevails over the pedagogical sight and, of no less importance, the Romanian music proves to be able to take on an experimental view.

We called our experiment *Voices in Space* as we think that musical art is not only a temporal, but also a spatial one. The performer sends his/her voice into the space into a certain distance, deepness, wideness, adapting it to the size and quality of the hall, to the display of the public. The voices also circulate one to the other in the scenic space or "air", in the same moment they make their way to the public. More than this, we "played" with the concept of space as the video processing allowed us to make big leaps over centuries, through symbolic elements which would "send" the public, by the mediation of sound and image, in a trip to past times. Last but not least, our conceptual play refers also to the idea of voices in the virtual space, a reality which has become more and more ours during this period (which will itself be history some day).

6. Conclusions

We celebrated 160 years of Higher Artistic Education in Iași with Romanian opera and operetta music wishing to value more and more the national specificity and a powerful artistic individuality, underlying the fact that Romanian lyric theatre has been contributing to the creation of the national Romanian style. The middle of the 20th century marked the beginning of the modern period of the Romanian composition school, when the most valuable works, in which folklore played an essential part, were created.

In the process of education and training of young singers we need to insist on the aspects of knowledge and authenticity, thus restoring the treasury of both universal and national values. It's the same with the old painted churches on the verge of destruction. The painting needs to be restored and preserved and the Romanian repertoire has to be researched, studied and (re)interpreted carefully, passionately and with strong engagement in its deepest layers. We all have a duty towards our ancestors and the feeling of national belonging gives us the

impulse to make Romanian opera better known, as we believe that “so long as we have theatrical spaces suited to the purpose, and performers willing to devote themselves to realizing its complex glories, operas will continue to be performed, and will continue to articulate some of the drama and complexities of human experience in ways no other art form can match. Many of the trees in this vast forest are very old and very grand. Their beauty and the shadows they cast are immense” (Abbate & Parker, 2019, p. 567).

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