



Musical-cultural activities in the Bulgarian emigrant communities in Romania in the second half of the XIX century

STEFANKA GEORGIEVA*

Faculty of Education, Trakia University – Stara Zagora
BULGARIA

Abstract: The presentation emphasizes on the musical-cultural activities performed in Brăila, a town called by historians “the cultural capital of the Bulgarian Diaspora”. Some of the initiatives of the immigration, besides the numerous popular concerts before the citizenry and at the homes of the rich Bulgarian families, go beyond regional life and reflect on the development of the pre-liberation and post-liberation Bulgarian musical culture. First of all, this refers to the appearance of forms of organized musical life with the creation of the Bulgarian-Romanian Musical Society “Muza” (1867) and of the Bulgarian Philharmonic Society “Mara” (1869). The ten-year stay in Brăila of Dobri Voynikov, one of the most famous writers of the Bulgarian National Revival, as well as his co-operation with the Romanian playwright Iorgu Caragiale, stimulates the writing of “dramas with singing” which the researchers of the Bulgarian musical theatre, quite reasonably, place in the entrance of its history. Among his associates are the brothers Isidor and Mihail Mihailidi (Mihaylovich) for whose performer’s and creative activities no analog is found in early Bulgarian musical culture.

Keywords: Bulgarian-romanian musical connections, Brăila, Dobri Voinikov, Isodor Mihailovich, Bulgarian-Romanian Musical Society “Muza”, Bulgarian Philharmonic Society “Mara”.

The tragic fate of the Bulgarian people under the tyranny of the five-century Ottoman yoke uproots living parts from our national community and condemns to exile thousands of Bulgarian families. The emigrant waves, owing to Kircali riots in the Bulgarian provinces and the Russian-Turkish wars in the XVIII century and the first half the XIXth, drive out of their historical territories great masses of the population to the Romanian Danubian principalities of Țara Românească and Moldova and to Southern Russia. The big Bulgarian emigrant colonies in București, Ploiești, Brăila, Galați, Alexandria, Giurgiu, Zimnicea etc, as well as numerous Bulgarian

* associate professor, PhD, fanig@mail.bg

settlements in Southern Bessarabia spring up at that time¹. So far, the history of these emigrant movements has not been entirely traced, but there has been a good deal of research on the topic by Bulgarian and Romanian authors. Part of this research is related to various aspects of the life and activities of the Bulgarian emigrants in Romania as concerns their commercial activities and economic improvement of their financial positions, while another part deals with their contribution to the literary heritage of the Bulgarian National Revival and to their cultural-educational initiatives². Particular attention is attracted by emigrants' political activities and their commitment to the struggle for liberation of the Bulgarian people, closely related to the Bulgarian revolutionary committees in Bucharest and Giurgiu. Therefore we can say that the history of the Bulgarian Revival would have been incomplete if the patriotic activities of the enormous Bulgarian Diaspora, temporarily or permanently residing on the territory of our northern neighbour, had been ignored.

Among the great number of factors which favour the development of the Revival activities in the second half of the XIX c., is the long life together of Bulgarians and Romanians in the lands along the lower reaches of the Danube River.

Their common Orthodox religion, intensive economic and cultural relations and, last but not least, the common political interests for national and state emancipation within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire, determine the positive spirit of the relations between the two peoples in the period, preceding the formation of their new states. As a result of all these circumstances, the big Romanian cities where the political and cultural elite of our neighbors is concentrated become "external" centers of the Bulgarian Revival. Some of the most eminent Bulgarian political functionaries, revolutionaries and writers live there – Georgi S. Rakovski, Hristo Botev, Vasil Levski, Lyuben Karavelov; Bulgarian schools, cultural-educational societies and clubs are open, books, newspapers and magazines are published in Bulgarian language. In this connection it is important to emphasize on the fact that the activities of the Bulgarian emigration "beyond the Danube" are not isolated, but they develop in a constant exchange of ideas and initiatives

¹ The emigration of Bulgarians not only to Moldova, Tara Românească, Russia, but also to Serbia, Greece and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, begins with the fall of Bulgaria under the Ottoman yoke and marks some culminations at the end of the XVI c. and the beginning of the XVII c., in the second half of the XVIII c. and the beginning of the XIX century.

² Here are some of them: *Bulgarian-Romanian Literary Relations in the XIX c.*, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, 1980; Syupyur E. *Bulgarian Emigrant Intelligence in Romania in the XIX c.* Sofia, 1982; Syupyur E., *Bulgarian Schools in Romania in the XIX c.* Documents. (1858-1877), Sofia, 1999; Dinova-Ruseva, V. *Bulgarian-Romanian Relations in Fine Art in the second half of the XIX c.*, in: *Tradition and Recent Features in Bulgarian Art.* Sofia, 1976, and many others.

with the functionaries from the raising “internal” Bulgarian Revival centers (Dragova 1980, pp.17-20). The period referred to above coincides with the time when the development of the new Bulgarian musical art begins. Historiography has dated our earliest secular music activities in the 50 years of the XIX century. They arise spontaneously out of the encounters of the Bulgarians with European music practices which are spread by foreigners – Magyars and Poles from Lajos Kossuth’s army. After the defeat of their national-liberation rebellions some of them settle in Shumen and other towns from the interior Bulgarian provinces, and set up the first orchestras which Bulgarian amateur musicians also join. Their repertoire includes “all sorts of difficult European styles (voices) such as quadrille, polka, czardas etc.” (Videnov 1969, pp. 41-49). In Turkish garrison orchestras there is a sporadic presence of French and Italian musicians among whom is Gaetano Donizetti’s brother, while in the Southern Bulgarian provinces – protestants and catholic missionaries prevail. A large wave of foreign, predominantly Czech musicians, join Bulgarian musical life after the Liberation at the end of the 70 years of the XIX century. Still later – not until the last decade of the century, Italian opera troupes begin to visit Bulgaria (Bics 1990, p. 10).

Along with the foreigners, in this period Bulgarians also contributed to the formation of musical culture of European type. This applies to the Bulgarians who received their education in two of the outstanding schools in Tsarigrad – the American *Robert College* and the French Catholic School, and also in Odessa, Belgrade and other Balkan cities. They take the initiatives for giving the first musical-theatrical performances, called with the word “opera”, modern for the Bulgarians (Lom and Shumen 1858); they form “musical bands” of young Bulgarian people (Shumen 1859), compose popular works, mainly vocal and works for the piano and introduce the study of European musical notation in modern Bulgarian schools. Later on, first in Svishtov, Lom and Shumen (1856), then in Bucharest (1861) and Constantinople (1866), they establish the first cultural clubs – *tshitalishta* – voluntary associations of educated and patriotic Bulgarians which become centers of various cultural-educational activities.

It is easy to find out that these new musical practices are concentrated in towns along the Danube River or towns within this region which are directly influenced both by central European musical culture and by the cultural life of the neighboring Romanian towns (Paskaleva 1981, pp. 114-135). Being open to new ideas, the Bulgarians are all out for them, but in some cases they oppose critically European music to traditional folk art, as a Bulgarian correspondent from Vlahia wrote: “Today all people in Tulcha are obsessed with Europeism (...) Even during the weddings no more folk dances are performed and all have become addicted to European songs and polka-plays, and all sorts of others” (Rakovski 1957, pp. 168-169). The

Magyar geographer Felix Kanitz reports about analogical changes in the Bulgarian style of music in his travel notes “The Danubian Bulgaria”: “Along with classical music the music of Offenbach and Strauss can also be heard (...), and in the towns along the Danube River Romany singers and musicians no longer attract the audience” (Tsalova 1978, p. 495). Hence, if the examples quoted above, reflect mainly impressions of the renovating intonation environment of the Balkan towns along the Danube River, in the 60s of the XIX century musical initiatives were registered among the Bulgarian emigrant communities in Vlachia-Moldavian Principality, which in their significance go beyond regional life and reflect on the development of Bulgarian musical art before and reflect and after the years of the Revival. The most significant of them are concentrated in Brăila – a town called by the Bulgarian historians “the cultural capital of the Bulgarian Diaspora” (Zhechev 1970, p. 9). In the various patriotic activities of the local emigrant society such as the opening of the Bulgarian school, the first one on Romanian land (1861), the Bulgarian theatrical society (1865), the Bulgarian literary society (1869), the forefather of today’s Bulgarian Academy of Sciences etc., a number of musical activities are performed, some of which give rise to the development of new Bulgarian musical culture.

That’s why Brăila becomes a centre of attraction for one of the most outstanding writers of the Bulgarian national revival – *Dobri Voynikov* (1833-1878) whose creative activities, including musical works, leave a bright trace in the Bulgarian education and culture before the Liberation. There, in the conditions of the free Romanian principality, and later on in Bucharest and Giurgiu, he works as a teacher and principal of the Bulgarian school for over a decade, a founder and manager of the Bulgarian theatrical society, a chief editor of the newspaper “Dunavska Zora.”³ These years of his life, seen even only through the discourse of his exceptional productivity as a playwright, mark the culminating point in all his activities and the achievement of an amazing artistic synthesis of the national and patriotic idea in numerous theatrical works.

Some facts of Dobri Voynikov’s biography suggest that probably the stimuli for this come from his cooperation with the Romanian playwright Iorgu Caragiale who, in 1868 in Brăila, together with the “Theatre of Romanian vaudeville” performs his melodrama *The Battle of the Bulgarians with the Turks in Varbovka*⁴. This play which recreates real historical events

³ Dobry Voynikov was a teacher in Brăila (1864-1870) and Giurgiu (1873-1874). From 1870 to 1876 he continued his theatrical activities in Bucharest, Giurgiu and Shumen where he came back after he became a Russian citizen.

⁴ More about the meetings of I. Karagiale’s theatrical troupe with the Bulgarian emigrant societies, see: Dragova, N. The itinerant musical troupe of Iorgu Karagiale in the life of the

is received with huge interest by the Bulgarian colony in Brăila. It inspired Dobri Voynikov to write a number of historical dramas – *The Conversion to Christianity of Preslav Court* (1868), *Rayna Knyaginya* (1866, second edition-1869), *The Coming to the Throne of Krum the Fearful* (1871) and forms his outlooks on the esthetics of the theatre of the Bulgarian national revival. That's why, these works always attract the attention of the researchers of the Bulgarian theatre who, quite reasonably, place them in the entrance of its latest history.

However, these historical dramas are of no less significance for the history of Bulgarian music. The literary text of Voynikov's dramas was "lined" with musical accompaniment. Even though no documented records on music sheets have been found, there is indirect evidence for the existence of theatrical music – adapted or composed by him. Below are the author's remarks on the titles of his plays indicating their genre – "drama with singing", as well as evidence of his contemporaries, published in the Romanian press: "Our brave Bulgarian teacher Mr. Voynikov, understanding the significance of the theatre and folk music, except for his remarkable quality as a teacher in Bulgarian language, possessing, at the same time, the qualities of a musician and theatrical author, produced **an opera** without any resources. In search for young Bulgarians, he created a small **orchestra** which showed for the first time on theatrical stage a real phenomenon, equally significant both for our fellow-countrymen and for other nationalities as well" (Savich 1868, pp. 57-58).

Of course, Voynikov's productions are not real opera theatre, although he himself is widely informed about the artistic specificity of the genre which we conclude from his book *A Handbook on Literature* published in Vienna. (1874). His contribution is more important with something else. With the "first steps" in the specifics of the opera, a genre which is constantly related to the traditions of Western European musical culture, Voynikov realizes the unlimited possibilities of the stage and the musical-literary synthesis for making popular patriotic and revolutionary suggestions by means of which the spectators can be consolidated as a national community.

His amateur theatre troupe, called "Bulgarian theatre" includes Bulgarians with professional musical training – the brothers Isidor, Mihail and Georgi Mihailovich, Isidore's wife – Eliza, Vasil Papazovich, Lazar Stanchovich etc. In 1867 the three brothers established the Bulgarian Musical Society "Mara" and later on they become members of the Bulgarian-Romanian Musical Society "Muza" (1869). According to historiographic evidence from Bulgarian and Romanian periodicals it is known that the first

Bulgarian emigration in Romania, in *Studia balkanica*, 18. Cultural Development of Balkan Peoples (XV-XX century), Sofia, 1985.

society continued to exist even after the 80s of the XIX century. Some of its Bulgarian members become co-founders of the new Romanian Musical Society “Lira” (Tsalova, 1978, p. 21)⁵. Bulgarian musicians take part in the stormy cultural life in Brăila not only with participations in literary-musical evening parties and charitable concerts of emigrant societies. Mihail organizes an orchestra “in which young people in Brăila from various nationalities take part”, he collaborates with Voynikov in the musical arrangement of the drama *The Conversion to Christianity of Preslav Court* and performs concerts for the piano at the homes of the wealthy families (Tsalova 1978, p. 49). Isidore is a musician of many talents – he plays the trombone and violoncello, he improves his piano skills in Vienna with the famous teacher Robert Fuchs (1855, 1866) and he listens to Thalberg’s and Liszt’s performances and to other famous virtuoso pianists (Tsalova 1978, pp. 15-99). His repertoire included “selected and skillfully performed musical compositions” by Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt (Zhechev 1970, p. 109). Both of the brothers compose music – mainly waltzes, polkas, quadrilles in the spirit of the romantic XIX century. Some of their compositions were printed in Bucharest and Vienna (Andreev 1953, pp. 38-39). These musical activities of the Bulgarian family Mihailovich have no analogue in our Revival culture. They all are an example about how the opportunities for professional training and the close contacts with European musical art, promote the development of their musical talents in the conditions of their life in Brăila, and after their return to Bulgaria in the 80s, and in Bulgarian musical life (Andreev 1953, p. 37).

Along with the musical activity amidst the “Brăila Bulgarians”, a real phenomenon in our Revival epoch, a different kind of relationship is born between the Romanian and the arising Bulgarian musical culture. Around 1864, Yanko Mustakov (1842-1881) returns after his study in a private Bucharest conservatory in Svishtov, one of the big Bulgarian Revival centres on the Danube. The years of his training there (1860-1864) have not so far been studied, but the range of his musical activities, compared only to that of his contemporary Dobri Voynikov in Brăila, proves that he received a solid professional training in the Romanian capital: he becomes a teacher and carries out versatile creative activities; he founded a music club (1865) and a civic chorus (1868); he provided musical instruments with his own resources and founded an orchestra (1870); the repertoire is ordered from Russia through agents in Bucharest. Mustakov participated with this orchestra in the performances of the local theatrical troupe, he even acted on the stage in

⁵ There are attempts for musical societies in other Bulgarian cities, too, but their existence is short: “Musical Society” (1861) and “Philharmonic Society” (1857-1877) in Varna, established by the Pole Bohinski. The first “Bulgarian Church-singing Society” was established in Ruse (1870).

some of the performances. The pupils who studied in his pedagogical and choral school joined Bulgarian musical life after the Liberation. Notwithstanding the fact that Mustakov's choral and vocal compositions, written on lyrics of Bulgarian poets, were not numerous, they are the first to mark the beginning of the chronicles of the new Bulgarian composer's works.

At the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century the history of the Bulgarian-Romanian musical cultural contacts has a lot of "white pages", probably as a result of lack of mutual interest in their study, behind which there are a number of reasons, above all of geopolitical character. As if the Tsarigrad Gate and the complex diplomatic actions of the Great Forces on the Balkans have managed, for centuries on end, to unite into one the non-homogeneous different language community and their national interests. The disunion between them starts after their liberation when Romania and Bulgaria set free from the trust of the Ottoman Empire. Even then the same Orthodox faith could not draw them closer together, and the wars on the Balkans at the beginning of the XX century drew the two neighboring countries apart even more. Yet, just in these years of crisis, the stream of young Bulgarian people to the musical conservatories in Bucharest doesn't stop. Some of the first Bulgarian composers – Maestro Georgi Atanasov and Emanuil Manolov live there for a short time, as well as pupils from different parts of Bulgaria where specialized musical schools are still not established. Even Karel Mahan, the most outstanding figure of the Czech musicians who settled in Bulgaria – a teacher, a composer and a founder of the Bulgarian musical periodicals, passed the long way to Sibiu in Transylvania to "perform all more important parts of his opera *Horo*" (Column "Miscellaneous", newspaper "Kaval" 1901, p. 74).

It is very likely that, when we bridge these gaps in the picture of our bilateral contacts with historiographic information, we will realize more clearly that musical art can create solid intercultural connections which are not always directly dependant on the political situation of time. Let's hope we will not miss the opportunity in the XX century to supply these deficiencies in the common musical history of Bulgaria and Romania.

References

- Bics R. (1990). Formation of Opera Theatre in Bulgaria and Romania. Parallels. In *Bulgarian Musicology*, 1.
- Column "Miscellaneous" (1901). In newspaper "Kaval", year II, 12-13.
- Dragova N. (1980). Cultural centers of Bulgarians in the XVIII and at the beginning of the XIX century. In *Studia Balkanica*, 15 (pp. 17-20). Sofia.
- Dragova N. (1985). The itinerant musical troupe of Iorgu Karagiale in the life of the Bulgarian emigration in Romania. In *Studia balkanica*, 18, Sofia: Cultural Development of Balkan Peoples (XV-XX century).

- Kanitz F. *The Danubian Bulgaria. Historical, Geographical and Ethnographic Travel Notes*, 1860-1875, S-P.
- Paskaleva V. (1981). Central Europe and Cultural Development of the Bulgarians during the Revival. In *Historical Review* (3/4) (pp. 114-135).
- Savich Ah. (1868). *Masca josŭ*. Brăila.
- Tsalova P. About the Bulgarian Musical Folklore from the Revival Epoch. In *The Bulgarian Nation during the Revival*. Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.
- Videnov A. (1969). *Articles on the History of Music in Shumen*, part I "Revival" (manuscript).
- Zhechev Nikolai (1970). *Brăila and the Bulgarian Cultural-national Revival*. Sofia: Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.