

Ella Urmă.

A life dedicated to singing in Iași city

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Abstract: A remarkable personality in the musical life of Iași in the second half of the 20th century, who turned the honorable age of 95 only this year, the soprano and professor Ella Urmă is an example of professional and human dedication. We honour her today both in light of her exceptional performances, which became a reference in the universal and Romanian repertoire, as well as from the perspective of her outstanding career as an elite pedagogue, who facilitated the training and affirmation of young talents on a national and international level. Moreover, her name is associated with the intense organizational activity which she supported in her capacity as founder of the local higher education professional singing school. On the basis of the bibliography provided in dictionaries, encyclopedias, historiographical syntheses, memoirs, chronicles and interviews, this study aims to rebuild a personality from the musical scene of Iași of days gone by, who, in her prestigious artistic life, was uniquely concerned with carving out a lyrical career, in the service of her teaching activity.

Keywords: history, style, genre, musical language, message

1. Introduction

The interest for the revalorization of a series of musicians of value belonging to the local artistic sphere materialized in 2009 by the involvement in the *Iași: People and Music* project – a series of 12 weekly radio shows broadcast by *Radio România Muzical* and produced by Prof. PhD. Laura Vasiliu. The shows were aimed at providing listeners with a full picture of the past and present musical culture, by introducing significant institutions, personalities and musical creations. The project comprised interviews with musicians who have lived and worked in Iași City, conversations about the music of a prestigious past, which determined me to analyze more thoroughly some of the emblematic post-war personalities. One of them was the distinguished professor and singer Ella Urmă, who, through her impressive carrier, has influenced artists belonging to different generations. Also, her high standing artistic and teaching activity has earned her numerous awards and honors countrywide: Order of *Cultural Merit*, 5th class, 1968; *Mihail Jora* Music Criticism Award for her entire artistic career (1997); Honorary Member

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of the Romanian Opera House in Cluj-Napoca, 2004; Diploma of Excellence, University of Arts “George Enescu”, Iași, 2004.

2. Research stage

2.1. Present-day reception of the musician Ella Urmă

As I was fascinated by the phenomenon of the present-day perception of the artist and starting from the general cultural background of that time, from the relations with former musicians, from the reassessment of documents and testimonials about the lives and work of different personalities, I then read many monographs, articles, memoirs, interviews, reviews, which materialized in several studies: *Mansi Barberis – personalitate a culturii muzicale ieșene. De la succesul de ieri la ignorarea contemporană* [Mansi Barberis – Personality of the musical culture in Iași city. From yesterday’s success to today’s oblivion] (Iațeșen, 2012) and *Femei compozitoare la Iași: Mansi Barberis și Elise Popovici Goia* [Women composers in Iași city: Mansi Barberis and Elise Popovici Goia] (Iațeșen, 2014).

Our current research is nothing but a natural continuation of our previous preoccupations. Moreover, it has a personal touch since, in addition to having read numerous references about the role model soprano and teacher Ella Urmă, I also had the opportunity to know the person of value behind the artist.

2.2. A particular perspective on the distinguished singer and teacher Ella Urmă

Although it has been seven years already since I made the interview, the memory of our meeting is still very fresh in my mind. I remember having noted the aristocratically elegant silhouette of the distinguished lady and her faint smile at the beginning of the interview, which ended up by overwhelming me as my host became more and more animated by the various topics of our conversation. She told her story with boundless energy, generously sharing much information about the time she lived and worked in, about the sensitive events that left a mark on her daily or professional life. With every revelation I had during our conversation I was impressed by her extraordinary communication skills in her personal relations with different musicians, lovers of music, personalities of the general cultural sphere and especially by her noble soul when faced with both personal and professional challenges. These are only some of the traits of character that in time created the aura of an exquisite artist of high moral and intellectual standard.

2.3. Image of the artist in different monographs and dictionaries

I thus understood the portrait that the musicologists George Pascu and Melania Boțocan so admirably sketched of this excellent singer in the *Hronicul muzicii ieșene* [Musical chronicle of Iași], the numerous reviews appearing in many specialized publications or in cultural periodicals, signed by

different authors, the documented articles about the role that professor Ella Urmă played in the fine arts education in Iași, in the works entitled: *Pagini din istoria învățământului artistic modern din Iași la 150 de ani, Existențe și împliniri – Dicționar biobibliografic, Ediția a II-a* [Pages in the 150-year history of modern fine arts education in Iași, Existences and Achievements – Bibliographic Dictionary, 2nd edition], written by the historian Mihail Cozmei.

2.4. An artist who raises journalistic interest for interviews and even a documentary

I have also noticed that the personality of the musician Ella Urmă, who has now reached the beautiful age of 96 years, has been most often revealed in interviews, the producers of which considered themselves privileged to have such an enchanting interlocutor. We refer here in particular to the interviews by the well-known journalists, editors and radio and television producers Alex Vasiliu (1996, 2006) and Luminița Constantinescu (2010, 2015), who managed to point out in their conversations different aspects of the singer's professional career, in relation with relevant moments in her biography. In our opinion, the peak in the reception of the artist and human Ella Urmă was the documentary entitled *N-am fost o divă* [I was not a diva], a combination of genres, the portrait-interview *Ella Urmă în dialog cu Laura Guțanu* [Ella Urmă in dialogue with Laura Guțanu], posted on line in 2012 and especially the cinema film the *Povestea unei vieți* [Story of a life], produced by Dragoș Zămoșteanu in cooperation with the *EuroEd* Foundation and shown for the first time at the Tătărași Atheneum Theater in Iași, in 2014.

3. Ella Urmă – a possible path of human spirituality from the lyric-emotional resonances of her Bessarabian birth place to the elite challenges of the cultural and artistic life in Iași

After having read the extensive documentation available and especially after having made personal contact with the singer and professor Ella Urmă, I reached the conclusion that her special mixture of human qualities and artistic endowment is one of the reasons of the unanimous recognition that she enjoyed both in her days and among present-day critics. We refer her more precisely to her Bessarabian birth place, the warmth, affectivity and spirituality of which coalesced with the cultural musical background in Iași, a city where the soprano was education, worked and enjoyed the great achievements of her singing and teaching career. Moreover, we believe that her Bessarabian origins are the source of her physical and psychological endurance, as Ella Urmă has always known how to keep a balance between her professional duties and human commitments, and how to preserve her quick wit which enabled her to captivate musicians, music lovers and cultural and other personalities, as well as her elegance and refinement. She put these qualities to good use both on stage and in her personal everyday life. We should add to this list her noble

soul and generosity proven by the numerous testimonials of her colleagues, close friends and especially students, whom she inspired with love for singing and confidence in themselves, a set of traits that are vital for the self-assertion and development of any singer. Thus, we are not surprised by the soprano's open answer to the question asked by Luminița Constantinescu, the well-known musical show producer, which was also asked on frequent occasions during other interviews: "Mrs. Ella Urmă, what is the secret of your longevity?" "There is no secret. I inherited the gene of a family in which both my grandfather (who was a priest in Ungheni Village, in Bessarabia, where I was born) and my father had very long lives." (Constantinescu, 2015)

3.1. Special family atmosphere

Indeed, the memories of the artist born on 26 august 1920 about the special family atmosphere in which she grew, about the moral values that she was taught since her early childhood, are fresh in her mind and allow us to retrace a noble period in the cultural history of the beginning of the 20th century, when thorough education, sharing of the forefathers' patriotism exhibited in the true meaning of the word and shaping of the intellect against the background of a truly genuine national specificity were vital for the growth of a future intellectual, musician, etc. With the excitement and joy of her exuberant nature, the musician told the journalist Laura Guțanu, in one of her interviews: "...My grandfather...Vichentie was a priest... an intellectual, although he was a country priest. He had attended the Theological Seminary in Leningrad. He had good articulation. He would speak equally good Romanian and Russian... My grandmother... Evghenia... was from a noble family. Her father had a title of nobility... She spoke incredibly good Russian, but little and rather poor Romanian... My mother... her name was Vera Guma. A beautiful and sociable woman, an extraordinary mother... My sister, Marcela, was born in 1923... and went to the Faculty of Philology, specialty French-Italian. My father, the officer Petru Manole... was wounded in the forced retreat in 1916, when he lost his left hand... He was extremely gentle, well-mannered,... understanding... When I turned two, my father moved to Iași..." (Guțanu, 2012).

3.2. Period of artistic and musical training

Trained in an elite musical environment between 1927 and 1931, she was initiated into the secrets of piano playing at the *Notre Dame* Institute in Iași. Being an officer's daughter, she has the chance of being admitted to the *Oltea Doamna* High School (1931-1939), where she distinguished herself and was offered the chance to sing as a soloist on several occasions, as a member of the choir directed by Elena Botez. Moreover, while she attended the *Regina Maria* Institute, she received a select artistic education due to Florica Nițulescu's piano classes and Gina Sandri's acting classes. She completed her specialized

education (1938-1942) at *George Enescu Academy of Music and Drama (Iași)* under the guidance of several renowned artists and professors: Rodica Nestorescu, Mansi Barberis – singing, Radu Constantinescu – piano, Antonin Ciolan – choir and choir conducting (Cozmei, 2010, p. 462).

3.3. Meanings of a cultural and musical Iași

If we ask ourselves today what the City of Iași meant for the soprano and professor Ella Urmă, the cultural-artistic environment which adopted, promoted and cherished the wonderful musician in her professional and human becoming, which offered her so many joyful moments, so many successes and achievements, from the first applauses during her school years to the delicious moments when flower petals covered the stage, offered by her loyal audience, who reacted enthusiastically during her recitals, concerts or shows along the years, we should consider ourselves happy as she can answer this question herself by relying on the memories of a lifetime of singing, on her personal convictions about the people and actions that contributed to the writing of a page in the history of a prestigious center, of a blessed epoch. “The fact that I chose music is due first and foremost to the City of Iași, to its elevated atmosphere, to the personalities who grew in this city and with whom I interacted, to the intellectuals of Iași who were music lovers and to the charm of this city that has, had and will always have a poetic soul” (Vasiliu, 1996), confessed the artist in an interview given to TVR Iași’s journalist and musical show producer, Alex Vasiliu, in 1996.

3.4. Emotional and cognitive landmarks in the evolution of the personality of the artist Ella Urmă

It is our firm belief today that her belonging to a generation of cultivated intellectuals¹ and of musicians of value (the conductor Antonin Ciolan, the piano player Florica Nițulescu, the singing teachers Vasile Rabega, Mansi Barberis, the composer Constantin Georgescu, the historian and encyclopedic critic George Pascu, etc.), as well as the special family equilibrium (created by her marrying the dentist Ioan Urmă and her maternal involvement in the education and professional development of her daughter Irina, who is currently teaching American literature at the Faculty of Freiburg), constituted deep

¹ The artist names in the interview by Luminița Constantinescu – *Soprana și profesoara Ella Urmă: o adevărată suverană a orașului Iași* [The soprano and teacher Ella Urmă: a true sovereign of Iași] – some of the personalities who contributed to the outlining of the cultural environment of old Iași: “Mihail Sadoveanu who used to come down to the city, on Copou Hill, with the dogcart, the poets Mihai Codreanu, Otilia Cazimir and George Topârceanu, who was a small man with high heels and bright and restless look”. We should add a few names of renowned professors, artists: Vladimir Buțureanu, Gheorghe Chipail, surgeons; the painter Emanoil Bardassare, etc.

emotional and cognitive landmarks in the evolution of the personality of the professor and singer Ella Urmă.

3.5. A career founded on the respect of her artistic mentors and teachers

A career based on feelings of gratitude, expressed on numerous occasions, using the most exquisite compliments addressed to her artistic mentors and teachers who were involved in her training. The portraits she made of the conductor Antonin Ciolan, professor of harmony Constantin Georgescu, piano player Florica Nițulescu, etc. are still memorable. The artist's exquisite nature also caused reactions from musicians who contributed to her becoming. Here are some of the wonderful testimonials of her singing professor, Mansi Barberis, which we found in the memoirs included in the book entitled *Din zori până în amurg* [From dawn to dusk]: "Ella Urmă, a cultivated and refined musician [...] is one of my most eminent students. I keep listening to and watching her with the same inner joy..." (Barberis, 1988, p. 90)

4. Role of the soprano Ella Urmă in the evolution of the lyric theatre of Iași

As a performer, Ella Urmă belongs to the generation of lyric artists who, in the early 1940s, were present at the official opening of the Romanian Opera House of Moldova. She has also been a founding member of this institution since October 1956, where she carried out a rich soloist activity until 1968. She chose many comic, lyric or dramatic parts, which included varied characters – from *Rosina* in Gioachino Rossini's *Barber of Seville* and *Giulietta* in Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann*, to *Margareta* in Charles Gounod's *Faust* and *Violeta Valery* in Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata*.

In an interview which she was good enough to give to me in 2009, I dared her, among other things, to describe in a few words the effervescent atmosphere during the staging of an opera to which she was the most attached (I was referring to staging, stage design and musical preparation) and to comment upon the character she interpreted in that show. "Like most sopranos I was very fond of Violeta Valery in *La Traviata*, because it required three voices. One has to be lyric coloratura soprano at the end of act II, then become dramatic coloratura soprano and at the end, because she is so sick and dying, one's voice has to be hardly audible. Why did I like this part? It is very interesting... one can transpose oneself, one can understand a situation... I strived to find a very wide and expressive range of variations in my voice, able to emphasize all of Violeta Valery's states of mind. No, it was not easy. First of all, because one had to abandon oneself. Nobody should see not even for a moment that one is Ella Urmă or some other performer. One had to manage to become Violeta Valery..." (Iațeșen, 2009). The artist was of course referring to her graduation show where she interpreted this part in 1942, and especially to its restaging after the creation of the Opera House in Iași, during the first

season of 1956, a version offered by the young musicians Grigore Iosub, conductor; Dumitru Tăbăcaru, director, Emil Chivu, choir master and Hristofenia Cazacu, stage designer. The echoes of this staging were not long to be heard, so that in January 1957, one of the renowned reviewers of that time, the music history professor George Pascu, argued that: “By forcing the intensity, she acquired some high-pitched accents that we noticed during the first act. Once her beginner’s stage fright is over and as soon as she gets used to the stage by frequently appearing on it, Ella Urmă will be able to master these excesses, all the more so as her voice may be heard perfectly in low intensity lyrical bits. In the part of Violeta, Ella Urmă sang beautifully, as she understood it and had a very clean performance. Her clear diction and musical phrasing are qualities that prove that Ella Urmă is a conscientious singer who studies her part thoroughly.” (Pascu, 1957, pp. 104-105) What do these remarks tell us? Although the author noticed, in 1956, the small voice imperfections which are actually inherent at the beginning of any singer’s career, she managed to create a balance in her acting and to have an unprecedented conception of the part she played, as the artist was known for her meticulousness and thorough study designed to understand her part and especially to create a genuine relation between stage and music dramaturgy. The importance given to the character and to its whole evolution, and the problematization around its literary, psychological and musical approach are a few aspects that the musician applied in her teaching activity. We also feel the need to point out the fact that the musicologist, historian and critic George Pascu followed her singing career not only in her opera shows, but also in the concerts held by the philharmonic orchestra, in her lied recitals, etc.²

5. Lied music performance conception

During the troubled years of preparation of the reinstatement of the Conservatory, when the setup of a lyric theater in the artistic Moldavian space was eagerly awaited, Ella Urmă distinguished herself in the musical life of our city and in other locations by voice miniature recitals covering a diverse stylistic range – from romantic (Franz Schubert) and postromantic sonorities

² George Pascu, *Premiera operei Bărbierul din Sevilla* [Premiere of the Barber of Seville], in *Iașul literar*, 3 March 1957; *Premiera operei Boema* [Premiere of la Boheme], in *Iașul literar*, 3 March 1958; *Boema în premieră la Opera de Stat din Iași* [La Bohema – the first performance at the State Opera House in Iași], in *Flacăra Iașului*, 8 April 1958; *Artiștii Operei ieșene pe estrada de concert* [The artists of the Opera House in Iași on the bandstand], in *Flacăra Iașului*, 21 May 1958, *Cronica concertelor* [Concert review], in *Iașul literar*, 9-10 Sept.-Oct. 1958; *Tinerețea veșnică a operetei* [The eternal youth of comic opera], in *Flacăra Iașului*, 17 December 1967; *Recitalurile Conservatorului* [Conservatory recitals], in *Flacăra Iașului*, 28 January 1968; *Conservatorul George Enescu 125. Prezențe în contemporaneitate* [George Enescu Conservatory 125. Presences in contemporaneity], in *Cronica*, Iași, 25 October 1985.

(Hugo Wolf), to impressionist (Claude Debussy) or Romanian (Eduard Caudella, Mansi Barberis) ones. When I wanted to know if over time she felt closer to the style of a particular epoch or composer, the artist answered in 2009: “I would say I like the lied very much, because I felt I was in a more intimate position. The connection with the audience was set more easily because the auditorium was smaller, and the twinning between the text and the music was so beautiful and so well-rounded that it helped my expressiveness a lot. One had to be oneself, to open one’s soul to the audience, relying on one’s own energy, on the expressiveness of one’s voice, with fine and subtle nuances... this is the lied.” (Iașeșen, 2009) The soprano’s answer reveals the different voice miniature performance conception, which points out the singer’s preoccupation with the use of the text-sonority associations, by paying attention to the whole style and language specificity, in an effort to internalize the artistic moment, by observing the psychology of the creative act.

The performance of any part, regardless of whether it belongs to the chamber, stage performance, oratorical and vocal-symphonic genres, requires the singer to learn an adequate technique and to put it to good use, depending on the complexity of the sound and extra-musical parameters. Starting from the contradictory opinions of singers related to the proper breathing method, to sound impostation and to voice homogeneity in all the singing ranges, I asked Ella Urmă to reveal some of her secret techniques, the use of which ensured her success over time. The answer was rather surprising: “There is no secret, dear. Everything is in plain sight. We breathe to live... Yet, there is a particular way of breathing when singing. This is maybe the secret. And breathing is any singer’s business card. When a singer knows how to breathe, he/she knows how to sing.” (Iașeșen, 2009)

6. Teaching activity

In addition to her remarkable performance evolution in opera and comic opera shows, in concerts or recitals, we should also underline the passion shown in the rehabilitation and recognition of the singing school in Iași, as teacher Ella Urmă trained numerous series of opera singers in over four decades (1946-1985). Mariana Cioromilla, Adriana Severin, Mihaela Agache and Nelly Miricioiu are only some of the singers of value who became well-known both in Romania and abroad.

When asked whether she crossed paths with her students later in her singing or teaching career, Ella Urmă argued that: “I’ve always followed their evolution and I’m sorry I don’t have any letters from them at hand now to show you that we kept in touch and consulted me. They used to ask me: I wonder if I should accept this part, madam. Isn’t it too early, isn’t it too late? They took into account my advice. And I think that it was good advice, because they managed beautifully.” (Iașeșen, 2009)

We need to stress the fact that the role that the teacher Ella Urmă played in the city was and still is extremely important, especially given the tense social and political background, when the Conservatory reopened after having been transferred to Făget in 1945-1946. Classes resumed in Iași in extremely difficult conditions, in the complicated era of the beginning of the post-war period, and Ella Urmă, along with Florica Nițulescu, Jean Ițicovici, Octav Gheorghiu, Mircea Mancaș and Ion Horceag, carried out increasingly persistent music popularization and audience education actions. To this effect, namely for general culturalization purposes, this team of teachers held “free music education classes, which could be attended by anyone who wanted to study music, regardless of age, profession and education level” (Pascu, 1964, p. 113).

6.1. Ella Urmă – a professor of conception in the promotion of a specific vocal arts teaching style

As the musicologist Mihail Cozmei noted, being preoccupied with teaching, professor Ella Urmă carefully and generously counseled singers at the beginning of their careers and inaugurated in the artistic education in our city, for the students in her singing classes “a particular teaching style, a conception of the art of singing and of the skill training mechanisms, basically of the science of using this delicate and extremely powerful tool which is the human voice.” (Cozmei, 2010, p. 207) Being perfectly aware of the technical and performance difficulties encountered by young singers at the beginning of their stage career, professor Ella Urmă compiled in 1976 a *Culegere de piese vocale* [Collection of pieces of music], which included 53 lieds, ancient airs and Romanian songs. The chosen opuses progressively contribute to vocal technique improvement, as the author also approached stylistically representative pieces of music. The comments in the introductory course on the conception of the technical and interpretative study of each opus are extremely valuable in connection with the style- and language-related aspects specific for each era: “In Johann Sebastian Bach, the element that creates that note of preclassical simplicity is the chorale, that simple, orderly, yet extremely expressive song. Bach also tends to instrumentalize the vocal line. These two aspects may be found in *Vrei tu inima* [My heart ever faithful] air, the structure of which is obviously related to that of the chorale, but which also includes short melodic moments specific to oratorio airs. The bits with grave and calm chorale tempo require the singing not to be vibrant and to reach an inner expressiveness through color.” (Urmă, 1976, p. 5) We need to add that the theoretical ideas and the original clearly expressed conceptions of the art of singing also had a practical counterpart, as Ella Urmă proved to be an excellent organizer of student shows, from the *Căsătoria secretă* [Secret Marriage] (Domenico Cimarosa) to the *Vocea umană* [Human voice] (Francis Poulenc).

The effort she put into the work with her singing students (1946-1951; 1960-1985) and the results achieved during her numerous stage productions and recitals also had an impact on the esteem she earned among her fellow singers, as Ella Urmă was elected head of the singing course and wrote, thanks to her teaching and managerial activity, “a new page in the history of the singing school in the Conservatory of Iași” (Cozmei, 2010, p. 207).

7. Conclusions

We need to emphasize the fact that it is rare that a soloist singer develops a career with the purpose of becoming a teacher, since such a decision entails giving up personal evolution and placing the emphasis on another’s artistic achievement, in other words, the development of a particular teaching psychology, which channels one’s efforts towards solving technical issues and towards enhancing the students’ vocal skills. Also in this respect, Ella Urmă diverted from the traditional conception of any artist who reverts to teaching towards the end of their singer career, as the musician prove to be first and foremost a professor of great value, who devoted herself entirely, with passion and professionalism, to training young singers: “I didn’t want to become an opera soloist singer. I just wanted to practice in order to understand what I needed to teach our students... I was passionate about teaching. A singing professor who has to guide students need to be experienced in this field. He/she needs to step on a stage and see what that feels like... to see what happens on stage...” (Guțanu, 2012).

These are the convictions of the role model Ella Urmă who, although belonging to the post-war generation, still fascinates nowadays by her ideas about the relevance of an autochthonous singing and teaching career, about her meaningful meetings with cultural or music personalities important in her career and life, about her successes or small setbacks in a life lived on the stage. Whoever has the curiosity to know her is struck by the nobleness of her face and by the freshness of her thoughts, which flow abundantly awaiting for possible receptors – reviewers, critics, music lovers or spiritual beauty lovers – able to appreciate, to cultivate and to transmit the values of art of singing in the manner in which the distinguished singer and professor Ella Urmă proved it herself in every moment of her life devoted to singing in the City of Iași.

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