

Four centuries of opera in Grigore Constantinescu's view *Review*

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Grigore Constantinescu, *Patru secole de operă. Istorie și stiluri, personalități creatoare, capodopere, repertorii* [Four centuries of opera. History and styles, creators, masterpieces, repertoires]. București: Editura ONB, 2014.

There is no doubt that closeness to lyrical theatre felt from different angles by the receptor musician (critic, journalist, and musicologist) involves an extremely complex responsibility due to multiple issues that an author should consider in his work. Therefore, the distinguished researcher **Grigore Constantinescu** convinced us over the years by his numerous articles, chronicles, reviews, history of music and stylistics monographs, dictionaries that **opera**, the fascinating performance over the centuries is a vivid and challenging phenomenon under continuous change that needs to be captured, explained, commented, judged and interpreted from all perspectives. This time we are in front of a huge challenge and musicological accomplishment. The book *Four centuries of opera. History and styles, creators, masterpieces, repertoires*, published by the National Press of the Opera in Bucharest 2014. It is the culmination of work dedicated to a life-time passion of the master, **the opera**. Even though Romanian and international research has been published important books in this area, we believe that this work is unique, a unique encyclopedia in specialized literature, aimed to provide every detail of a genre.

What argument support this statement that may appear exaggerated to some people? Well, if we look into a large part of varied European dictionaries, encyclopedias of opera (French, German, Italian, English), we may notice that articles focused on presenting the biographical and composition aspects of a creator belonging to any stylistic age are written by different authors. To add more, the articles are usually written by a team of authors as it is difficult for one author to cover all styles, creators, masterpieces and repertoires.

The Romanian musicological research, the master Grigore Constantinescu proved that the impossible could become reality by publishing such a big book. It is divided into three parts opening with a *Prologue to the*

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history of opera, followed by (*Baroque and Classical opera; Musical theater in Romanticism, Romantic national schools; Modern and contemporary opera*) and ended with the *Epilogue – Lyrical theatres of the world*. The book impresses by its ability to summarize multiple information, even though it is well-known, it is presented in a coherent and presented in a unique clear style. Secondly, the book stirs reader's interest by the novelty of its ideas on different performances of creators viewed as minor until recently, whether out of ignorance or because some of the scores were not known or some of the performances have not been seen. Moreover, the desire of the writer to present the less known works reflects a novel concept of style and modernity. We refer to the summary of thematic, stylistic and language features deriving for the creations of composers neglected until now due to lack of documents that represent in Constantinescu's view the foundation of affirmation of great composers of composers: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, Giacomo Puccini, Alban Berg, Benjamin Britten, etc. It is not by accident that we mentioned these representative names, as 509 pages include the systematization of data, information about composers, stage works, topic content, the relation of librettos with characters and sound, in addition to analytical, stylistic, aesthetic comments of librettos. The author gives us true moments of grace by his comments full of hermeneutics of the work of Mozart (*The Magic Flute*), Wagner (*Tristan und Isolde*) and Verdi (*Traviata*). For instance, for the latter opera, Grigore Constantinescu provides a deep musicological commentary, starting from composer's psychological and emotional motivations for the libretto, resulting in a text of great expressivity in describing the meanings of the time and over time of a controversial character Violeta.

Mentioning just a few features of this study, it is obvious that the book goes beyond a mere history book or encyclopedia of the genre that summarizes information as its author undertakes multiple roles: a historian, an aesthetician, a critic, a psychologist, an opera philosopher. This is the case of pages that provide a criticism of emblematic composers for the 19th century, namely, their reception at the time, arguments presented in the sub-chapters: *For and against Wagner – Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Baudelaire*.

As we continue the reading of the book, the author never stops in amazing us by his force of presenting and empathy with the entire issue. So, we easily go beyond traditional systematizations of creators and their work and the view according to which the history of music in general and specifically of opera involves standardized classifications, many times simplistic of accomplishments and failures of artists. Well, Grigore Constantinescu, the musicologist of high culture, discusses in detail the psychology of experiences accumulated by artists gaining the understanding and relevance of their works.

Another aspect that is worth mentioning is the activity of the authors as a musical critic, he gives special importance to interpreters, mentioning

important singers of the 19th century and discussing the characters for each type of voice or talking about the technical and expressive difficulty that interpreters face in the 20th and 21st centuries. Also, we also noticed the key role that any historian should undertake when the researcher talks about receptivity, recognition of specific scores of the 20th century that have been explained not only by the literary value of their librettos, but also by their quality, by the power of suggestion of their sound. For this purpose, the author mentions the operas of Francis Poulenc, interpreted successfully contrary to scores of Darius Milhaud, which despite their complex libretto did not manage to pass through time easily. In a natural discourse, in his presentation of modern French opera, Grigore Constantinescu integrates the names of composers of Romanian origin who worked abroad (Marcel Mihalovici, Marius Constant, Vladimir Cosma), important names of international repertoire (Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, Gustav Charpentier or Olivier Messiaen).

Written in a stylistic symbiosis of musicology with literature, in which ideas are so clearly presented so as the well-selected words full of gentility play the role of strengthening their meaning, the book shows us step by step that the vision of the musicologist, researcher and distinguished professor Grigore Constantinescu, *Four centuries of opera*, is more than a presentation of facts, events, personalities in a chronological order. We see more than that, accomplished artistic destinies or in search of an ideal stated in works with diverse colorful topics that are not accidental but rather the result of many factors (psychological, aesthetic, philosophical, political, cultural, musical) that intertwine giving to readers a feeling that past performances may be reshaped into modern ones giving us the freedom of meditating on the future of performances.