

# Alexandru Zirra's Stage Creation in National and International Context

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**Abstract:** Alexandru Zirra, a prominent personality from the interwar musical period of Iași, whose impressive work, carried out across various fields (composition, performance, musicology, teaching) has challenged researchers to dedicate many pages to him in their specialized volumes, unfortunately continues to be surrounded by mystery even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although his creations, across all genres (chamber, choral, symphonic, vocal-symphonic, opera) have been analyzed, and glowing reviews have been written on the occasion of some first auditions, the majority of his opuses have remained virtually unknown. For example, only two of his five significant stage creations (the historical opera *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* and the fairy-opera *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings]) were performed at the Romanian National Opera in Bucharest in 1941, just a few years before his passing (1946). This is a discouraging fact, given that we are referring to a musician with a mobilizing artistic temperament, who strived, throughout his career, to promote his work. The lack of interest from the part of professional musical institutions in interpreting Alexandru Zirra's opuses, from all genres, yet especially those from the lyrical theatre genre, has determined us to review the literature on the topic. We have discovered that most authors have commented on his creations in relation with their creator's belonging to the interwar generation. Therefore, in our research, we will adopt a general approach to Alexandru Zirra's performances from a historical and stylistic perspective, not only in the national context, but also in relation to the trends and opuses from the West European music of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Keywords:** interwar musician, opera, theme, language, national mark, West European-inspired musical styles

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. State of the art

What can we remember today about the interwar musician of Iași, Alexandru Zirra? A refined performer, aspiring lyrical artist, talented composer, whose works across various genres<sup>1</sup> (symphonies, programmatic symphonic poems, chamber works, choruses, lieder, operas) were more often commented upon than interpreted; a strict Professor of harmony in the

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<sup>1</sup> Symphonies: *Symphony I*, *Peasant Symphony II*, *Descriptive Symphony III*; Symphonic poems: *Tândală și Păcală*, *Țigani*, *Uriel d'Acosta*; Chamber music: *Sonata for violin and piano*, *Three songs for piano*, *Choral, prelude and fugue for piano*.

Conservatory of Iași (1907-1925; 1931-1940) and of Cernăuți (1925-1931); a responsible director of two artistic higher-education institutions<sup>2</sup> and of the Romanian Opera in Bucharest (1940-1941); a remarkable musicologist (Zirra, 1984, pp. 59-93); a folklorist whose theoretical ideas, debated in various articles (Zirra, 1922/1923), were reflected in his creation – all in all, a personality with a distinguished career, which would stimulate the interest of many researchers: Alexandru Schmidt (1967), Mihail Jora (1968), Emanoil Ciomac (1980), Iosif Sava (1982), Alexandru Cosmovici (1984), George Pascu (1987,1997), Veronica Berbescu Zbarcea (1996). An all-round synthesis of his work has been carried out by the musicologist Vasile Vasile in the monographic volume *Alexandru Zirra* (2005).

## **1.2. Purpose of the research**

The consistent bibliography has determined us to synthesize herewith some of the biographical, compositional and analytical aspects upon which scholars have commented. Starting from the opinion of the well-known critic Petre Comarnescu regarding the response to the opera *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* – “...But the nature of this opera has not yet been fully analysed; its style and characteristics have not been defined, making it difficult to compare him and to put him in his rightful place in the music production from our times ...” (Vasile, 2005, p. 239) – we will attempt to extend this assertion at the level of Alexandru Zirra’s entire dramatic creation, highlighting only those features that clearly reflect the relationship with the national vocal dramatic universe, and particularly the possible correlations with the international one. We believe that only by establishing correspondences at the level of themes, drama and general sonorous expression with styles and opuses from the international repertoire of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can understand Alexandru Zirra’s role in the Romanian interwar stage creation.

## **2. Musical studies attended in Iași and completed in Milan. A decisive factor in connecting Alexandru Zirra to the West-European stylistic tendencies**

Our apology on Alexandru Zirra (1883, Roman – 1946, Sibiu), the composer who found creative inspiration in lyric theater, began after graduation (1901-1906), once his dream of becoming a performer on the big stages of the world came true, when the prestigious professors of the Conservatory of Iași (Sofia Teodoreanu, Gavriil Musicescu, Titus Cerne, Enrico Mezzetti, etc.), appreciating the vocal and creative skills of the young musician, recommended him for a scholarship at the Conservatory of Milan (1907-1908; 1910-1912).

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<sup>2</sup> He was the director of the Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Arts of Iași and of the Conservatory of Cernăuți (1925-1931).

What did this possibility to continue his education in Italy really mean for Alexandru Zirra? Well, his collaboration with Carlo Gatti's exuberant personality comes to mind. During harmony, counterpoint and composition courses, Gatti would stimulate the young composer to discover unique creative solutions that were naturally connected to the European music styles from the first decades of the previous century. Evidently, the parallelism of some of the trends of the time, i.e. traditional (Verism, Post-Romanticism, Neoclassicism) or avantgarde (Impressionism, Expressionism), of some musical languages (tonality enlargement, modalism, atonalism or dodecaphonic serialism), changes in the stage genre (*chamber opera, monodrama, opera ballet, opera oratorio*) or the latter's transformation based on the dynamics of the concepts of programmatism and symphonism were not unfamiliar to him.

The Moldavian creator assimilated this knowledge and capitalized on it in his own way, according to his particular Moldavian sensibility and inclination to harmonic coloring diversity (West European classic-romantic tonalism combined with Romanian modalism from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the resources of which he discovered in Gavriil Musicescu's scores, which served as a model in his approach to choral or dramatic music), thus proving himself in lyric compositions as a follower of Giuseppe Verdi and Giacomo Puccini's views on vocality and stage drama.

### **3. Direct or indirect contact with the representative styles and opuses of the 20<sup>th</sup> century favoured a new conception on lyric theatre**

Deepening his studies abroad was a decisive step in Alexandru Zirra's artistic development, given that, in the Italian musical ambience of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, his first contact was with Giacomo Puccini's scores, who has obtained as far back as 1895 a resounding success with his opera *Manon Lescaut*, followed by *La Bohème* (1896), *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), *La Fanciulla del West* (1910).

Even though they are known as shows integrated in the verist movement, the late Romanticism marked the relation between word and sound. We will briefly mention, in chronological order, other masterpieces from various musical cultures belonging to the international stage repertoire which have undoubtedly determined possible relations to theme, genre and language in the local area and, implicitly, in Alexandru Zirra's repertoire. In 1902, Claude Debussy completed the lyrical drama in five acts *Pélleas et Mélisande*, in which, even though the creator's option for the symbolist theme entailed certain relations with Romanticism, the particular correspondence between the multiple meanings of the libretto and the French sound modalism classified the opera as a document of musical Impressionism. Moreover, only several years later, this time in Germany, Wagner's mark was obvious in Richard Strauss's case, particularly in his two masterpieces *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1906), in

which the Expressionist features derived from the relation to the Post-romantic style. In the same period, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1901), in the Austrian artistic context, the innovative creator Arnold Schönberg, while trying to break loose from the master of Bayreuth, composed the cantata *Gurrelieder*, a complex piece for five soloists, narrator, chorus and large orchestra, another authentic testimony of the Post-romantic style. This movement's reverberations also branched in the case of the atonal monodrama *Erwartung* due to Schönberg's option for the nocturnal development of the action, which, in correspondence with abstract sonority, introverted character, would be associated to the Viennese method of capitalizing on the Expressionist style.

In contrast, the other tendency of the nonconformist style is also revealed through the telluric force of expression, the exacerbation of language and sonorous expression parameters, the redefinition of the concept of syncretism, specific to the Russian stage, and more specifically to Igor Stravinsky, in his ballets *The Firebird* (1909), *Petrushka* (1911), *The Rite of Spring* (1913). On the other hand, the relationship between tensioned libretti, with violet hues, and modal-chromatic sonority, has determined possible associations between Expressionism and Impressionism in the opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) and in the pantomime ballet *The Miraculous Mandarin* (1919), opuses of the Hungarian creator Béla Bartók.

This is the controversial stylistic context of the European lyric theatre from the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which represented a challenge for Alexandru Zirra in his vocal dramatic creation from 1912 to 1943. In this regard, we make mention of: fairy or the vocal-symphonic poem for soloists choir, orchestra, ballet ensemble *Luceafărul* [The Morning Star], 1912; the operas *Alexandru Lăpuşneanu*, 1930, rev. 1944 (historical drama in three acts and four scenes based on Costache Negruzzi's short story); *O făclie de Paşte* [An Easter Torch], 1937 (psychological opera in three acts based on Ion Luca Caragiale's story); *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings], 1938 (fairy opera in 2 acts based on Ion Creangă's fairy tale); *Furtuna* [The Storm], 1941 (lyric show in three acts based on Grigore Ureche's story); *Ion Vodă Potcoavă* [Voivode Ion Potcoavă], 1943 (historical drama in three acts based on the novel *Nicoară Potcoavă* by Mihail Sadoveanu).

#### **4. Literary and stylistic options in choosing and processing themes**

We notice Alexandru Zirra's tendency towards sharing the Wagnerian view on performance (he is the author of the libretto from the dramatic works) by his approach to the fantasy universe in the fairy-opera *Luceafărul* [The Morning Star], interpreted as a reminiscence of his preference for "The Flower Maidens scene from *Parsifal*" (Cosmovici, 1994, p. 96) or of the historic, legendary themes, as revealed by most of his stage creations *Alexandru*

*Lăpușneanu, Ion Vodă Potcoavă* [Voivode Ion Potcoavă], *Furtuna* [The Storm].

The option for the literary universe created by Ion Creangă in his famous fairy tale *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings] is surprising and refreshing, as is his openness to the humour and irony from the sung, played and danced story *Renard* (1916) by Igor Stravinsky, where a mixture of zoomorphic characters display is a satire on society. In the same manner, Alexandru Zirra elevates the parody, the charade, to a national level, reinterpreting a fairy tale in the context of the Romanian interwar period.

As we said, the period in which Alexandru Zirra studied abroad was favourable for establishing contact with the musicians of the time, for attending auditions of various scores, some more traditional, others more nonconformist. Regarding the impressions conveyed by the audition of the monodrama *Erwartung* by Arnold Schönberg, which Alexandru Zirra seems to have attended, he did not formulate any opinion. However, it evidently left its mark on him because, later on, he used the theme of anguish from the Schönbergian stage creation as the guiding principle in putting together the Romanian performance of I. L. Caragiale's naturalist short story *O făclie de Paște* [An Easter Torch].

Even though the natural chronological order of the sequence of dramatic works – in relation to the time frames in which Alexandru Zirra was concerned with writing and completing his stage scores, throughout his lifetime – would entail a presentation per year of composition, in what follows, we will try to support our ideas in relation to the thematic and stylistic associations between the shows under discussion.

## **5. Alexandru Zirra's stage creation. A historical and stylistic approach in a national and international context**

Some of the general and distinctive features of Alexandru Zirra's opuses will be underlined in what follows, taking as a case in point: the vocal-symphonic poem for baritone, mixed choir, ballet ensemble and orchestra *Luceașărul* [The Morning Star], the historical drama *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*, the historical drama *Ion Vodă Potcoavă* [Voivode Ion Potcoavă], the lyric theatre performance *Furtuna* [The Storm], the fairy-opera *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings] and the psychological opera *O făclie de Paști* [An Easter Torch]. In our approach, we will constantly seek to establish their connection with the national and international scenes from the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **5.1. *Luceafărul* [The Morning Star], fairy-opera or vocal-symphonic poem for baritone, soprano, mixed choir, ballet and orchestra ensemble**

Created during Alexandru Zirra's studies in Milan, this work brought him international recognition; he was awarded the distinguished title of *Magister in compositione*, the musician's source of inspiration being Eminescu's themes with their philosophical implications.

Despite being a creation that marked his debut as a composer, of which only a fragment was preserved in the Romanian Academy Library (according to musicologists Octavian Lazăr-Cosma, Alexandru Cosmovici and Vasile Vasile) it is clear that, through this opus, Alexandru Zirra promised to become an innovating artist. The score is a synthesis of Post-romanticism (*fairy-opera* or *musical féerie* for baritone, soprano, mixed choir and orchestra, ballet ensemble) in that: the poetical side of music (sequence of scenes, ample tones, where an important role is played by percussion instruments and combinations of wooden wind instruments, designed based on Rimsky-Korsakov's orchestration, in order to highlight the expression of extroversion), the apices reached while calling the *Luceafărul* [The Morning Star] (Vasile, 2005, p. 214), the tense development of intervallic structures from protagonists' soloistic scenes.

The recitative in late Romantic style, associated with a Debussyan transparent sonority – The Morning Star entering Cătălina's chamber (Vasile, 2005, p. 215), highlights the creator's possible affiliation to the post-romantic synthesis tendency, which Alexandru Zirra resorted to and applied differently in his opera scores, adapting it to the Romanian stage and, what is more, bringing out local specificities in each of his opuses.

### **5.2. Alexandru Lăpuşneanu historical drama**

Only a few scores were written in the ambience of the diverse themes of the Romanian stage creation from the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the historical opera *Petru Rareş* (1889) by Eduard Caudella, the historical/mythological themed shows *Traian şi Dochia* [Traian and Dochia] (1921), *Agamemnon* (1922) by Dimitrie Cuclin, the musical dramas *Năpasta* [The Misfortune] (1928) by Sabin Drăgoi, *Marin Pescarul* [Marin the Fisherman] (1933) by Marţian Negrea, the comic operas *Cu dragostea nu-i de glumit* [Love is not a Joke] (1933) by Constantin Nottara and *O noapte furtunoasă* [A Stormy Night] (1935) by Paul Constantinescu, the tragedy *Œdipe* (1921-1931) by George Enescu being at the forefront.

We notice that the historical opera itself, even though it is the symbol of the national conscience in the interwar period, is used with certain discretion, the creators preferring literary topics that are more accessible and easier to concentrate into librettos in the development of either drama or comedy.

Alexandru Zirra's general option for the historical drama, in terms of theme, can be best explained from its relation with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian stage creation: *Ivan Susanin* [A Life for the Tsar] (1836) by Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka, *Boris Godunov* (1874) by Modest Mussorgsky, *Cneazul Igor* [Prince Igor] (1869 rev. 1890) by Alexander Borodin.

The fundamental question is why Alexandru Zirra decided to use, in his first opera, the historical subject gravitating around a highly controversial character, i.e. *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*, a subject treated in great detail in 1840, from a literary perspective, in the form of Costache Negruzzi's eponymous short story. At first sight, as we stated above, the historical musical drama was partially approached in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which allowed the creator to substantially enrich his repertoire. However, if we consider the musician's views at the time when he dwelt on this subject, we draw on a colleague of his generation, Alexandru Lascarov Moldovanu, mentioned in Vasile Vasile's monograph, who the composer confided in back in 1917: "... I want to humanize this prince, who is regarded by everyone as a cruel soul, and nothing else" (2005, p. 218).

Starting from Alexandru Zirra's statement, we can clearly notice one of the essential differences in the notion of the libretto from *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*, centered on underlying the psychological traits of a ruler, in comparison with another creator, Modest Mussorgsky, who, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, resorted to Pushkin's text in *Boris Godunov*, revealing the historical truth in the development of the subject, the central character being presented realistically. What we have to remember is that, from 1911 until 1946, the composer created three versions of the score, Alexandru Zirra aiming at achieving as concentrated a libretto as possible. Thus, he left out the first chapter from Negruzzi's novella, and included only Ruxandra's urging of the ruler to spare the boyars' life from the second chapter (Vasile, 2005, p. 222). From a musical point of view, the work is structured in four acts taking the form of an arch with two pillars, namely two musical moments of great expressiveness and sonorous tension, performed by the main character. From these we can also infer the essence of the subject: the monologue from the beginning of the score suggests compassion for the people oppressed by the hypocrite landowners, and the final solo fragment highlights the ruler's pain, after he was poisoned by the traitor boyars (Vasile, 2005, p. 223). The composer's capacity to rebuild the source of inspiration (Motoc is murdered in the first act), the creation of a visionary ruler guided by his wish to have a new class of boyars made up of ordinary people, the inclusion of self-standing dramatic scenes or moments that cannot be found in the short story, "the Council's irritation", "the convict's curse" (Vasile, 2005, pp. 224-225), the option for other names for characters whom the composer considered to be more relevant in terms of sonority (the renowned boyar Stroici became

Cornea), all of these make Zirra an innovative creator who dwelt on the relationship between libretto and music, as a conqueror of a history which he would rewrite. Even though he did not deviate from the general landmarks, he nevertheless created the music in close connection with the socio-political phenomenon itself, interpreting it and offering a critical perspective on the data. The score itself reveals a classical architecture from a general perspective: orchestral preludes, recitatives, arioso, arias, monologues, the local touch being highlighted by the traditional intonations from the duets (*Lăpușneanu-Ruxandra*), choral sections (*the peasants' choir, the monks' choir*), quartets (end of act I), etc. Moreover, the music is highly diverse, based on its correspondence with the dramatic content (Romanian song, Byzantine intonation, Polish rhythm). Regarding the vocal parts, we can notice, on the one hand, a similarity with the mussorgskian style in the development of the soloist moments (recitatives, monologues) and, on the other hand, the obvious relation with the Italian concept of song, in the manner of Giuseppe Verdi or Giacomo Puccini, particularly in the ensembles (the duet between *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* and *Ruxandra*).

The frequently used comparison between Zirra's opera *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* and Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* is drawn from several perspectives: the theme, the slow promotion of the two opuses (both waiting a long time on bookshelves before being rendered to the public), the construction of declamation. We are referring to similarities in the relationship between text and sonority between Lăpușneanu's arioso *Simțesc că sfârșitul s-apropie* [I feel the end approaching], act IV (*Alexandru Lăpușneanu*) (Fig. 1) and the final monologue known as *Testamentul lui Boris, Acum vei începe să domnești* [Boris' will, Now you will begin your reign], act IV (*Boris Godunov*) (Fig. 2).

We must not forget that Alexandru Zirra has authored many symphonic poems and programmatic symphonies, which shows preference for harmonic diversity based on the evolution and succession of contrasting scenes and musical drama, suggested especially by the timbre (the moment of killing the boyars, in which the timbre of the cellos is grave, the sound fragmentation being achieved by alternating choral, soloist and instrumental segments).

We are also referring to the gradual development of the scenic and musical performance, which stands out in Alexandru Lăpușneanu's first monologue, from which the leitmotifs aimed at characterizing both the protagonist, in the extreme dynamism of his attitudes (either violent, or apparent calmness, that anticipates manifestations of a maximum tension), as well as Ruxandra's balanced, reconciliatory attitude. These are just some of the arguments which support the response to the opus, as a possible association between two genres specific to post-romanticism: opera and symphonic poem.



The image shows a musical score for a monologue. It consists of five systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line (labeled 'Lăp.'), a piano accompaniment (piano), and a bass line (labeled 'Bap.'). The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The lyrics are in Romanian: 'Simțesc că sfârșitul s-apropie'. The score features various musical notations such as clefs, time signatures, notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'pp' and 'fp'.

Fig. 1 Excerpt from Lăpușneanu's monologue *Simțesc că sfârșitul s-apropie* [I feel the end approaching], act IV (*Alexandru Lăpușneanu*)

The image shows a musical score for a monologue. It consists of four systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line (labeled 'Bor.'), a piano accompaniment (piano), and a bass line (labeled 'Bap.'). The tempo is marked 'Andante'. The lyrics are in Russian: 'Прощай, мой сын! Умирать. Св. как ты цар. стар. вать нач. вешь. Но спра. шивай, как. как пр. вим а цар. стар. вать со'. Ты цар. стар. вать со'. пр. азу ч. сешу, как мой н. следки, как сын мой пер. в. родный.' The score features various musical notations such as clefs, time signatures, notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'pp' and 'fp'.

Fig. 2 Excerpt from *Testamentul lui Boris* [Boris' will], monologue, act IV (*Boris Godunov*)

It should be noted that Enescu attended the audition of the second version of the show, which took place at the Opera from Bucharest, in 1941, declaring his enthusiasm for the achievement of his colleague from the same generation – Alexandru Zirra –, whom he recommended in 1944 for an important award – the Romanian Academy’s *Hamangiu Award*. Unfortunately, the first version of the opus was lost in Berlin during the war before being staged, the composer later creating another two versions. Thus, the staging of the music after 1946 and all enactments from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were based on the third version of the opus, completed in Făget (Cosmovici, 1984, p. 29).

### **5.3. *Ion Vodă Potcoavă* [Voivoide Ion Potcoavă] historical drama**

The correspondence in terms of theme and language of the score of *Alexandru Lăpuşneanu* is revealed in the composer’s last stage creation (1942), i.e. *Ion Vodă Potcoavă* [Voivode Ion Potcoavă] (libretto inspired by the novel *Nicoară Potcoavă* by Mihail Sadoveanu), which completes the arch of historically-themed dramatic stage opuses. Summarizing some of the aspects of Alexandru Zirra’s libretto, we find that the protagonist was, for a short while, the prince of Moldavia (end of 1577). Aware of the Council’s practices, he gave up the throne and took refuge at the King of Poland Stephen Báthory’s court, where he was killed.

Structured in three acts, this opera – the same as *Alexandru Lăpuşneanu* – bears similarities between the general sound expression and vocality with the style of the veristic creations, particularly with Giacomo Puccini’s works. Furthermore, the constant exploitation of the male choir does not only contribute to creating a sober musical ambience, but also leads to the source of stylistic inspiration greatly appreciated by the composer: the ensemble moments from Verdian scores embedded with national sentimentalism. The Romanian mark is obvious, on the one hand, through the resort to Byzantine music – the researcher Alexandru Cosmovici draws attention to the relevance of a “fugue choir in Byzantine modes” (1984, p. 42) and the musicologist Vasile Vasile mentioned that “The boyars’ choir ... it is difficult to tell the truth”, the development of sound “in the plagal doric with psaltic resonance” (Vasile, 2005, p. 292) and, on the other hand, to the traditional intonations presented in the majority of the soloist, choral or instrumental moments of the opera: “*Tu te duci bade în lume*, act II” [You’re going out into the world, dear, act II] (Vasile, 2005, p. 290).

### **5.4. *Furtuna* [The Storm] lyric theatre performance**

Another manner of approaching legend-based operas refers to maintaining the general historical context, the development of events being the result of the creator’s fantasy of subjectively combining real and imaginary elements, like in the case of *Furtuna* [The Storm] (1941). This opera was

regarded by George Enescu in 1942 as a correspondence, in the Romanian stage creation, to the opera *Pénélope* by Gabriel Fauré (Cosmovici, 1984, p. 41). The subject is inspired by a legend from the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, taking place around Secu Monastery of Neamț, a halidom built by courtesy of the vornic Nestor Ureche, the father of the renowned chronicler. At the center of attention is actually the drama lived in the tower of the monastery by Ana, the vornic's wife and the mother of the chronicler who, with canonical patience, "wove a beautiful church garment" (Cosmovici, 1984, p. 40) for a long time. Therefore, the event recorded by Nestor's son, the renowned chronicler Grigore Ureche, became the argument of the libretto in three acts written by the composer<sup>3</sup>.

Alexandru Zirra imagines a romantic plot, in the manner of Vincenzo Bellini's Italian melodramas (or in that of the French melodrama *Pénélope* created by Gabriel Fauré in 1913 in post-romantic style, comprising many post-Wagnerian moments).

Unlike his other creations, *Furtuna* [The Storm] does not fit into the traditional structure. The tension, the waiting dominating the second act (the female protagonist weaving the fabric with endless patience), suggested by the music and lyrical moments, create possible correspondences with *Pénélope* by Gabriel Fauré. The similarity does not solely consist in the association with the libretto, but also in the musical methods used. Thus, while the score is more airy, from a vocal perspective, Alexandru Zirra sprinkled the orchestration with many effects aimed at amplifying the tone colour, achieving a sound in the style of the late Romanticism, and integrating the vocal lines into the instrumental ensemble. The difference between the two creators is obvious in Zirra's use of folkloric elements into a quasi-counterpointal score, with Byzantine monodical and polyphonical intonations, the composer sometimes using patriarchal musical effects in keeping with plot development.

### **5.5. *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings] fairy-opera**

Surprisingly, after the effort to complete the complicated, dramatic score for *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*, Alexandru Zirra focused on fairy-opera. Thus, in Iași, in 1938, he composed original music, inspired by Ion Creangă's stories, particularly by *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings]. The composer followed the main story line, but made some changes at the level of

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<sup>3</sup> In brief, Nestor Ureche lost his faith in his wife, Ana, after he found her talking to a young highland boyar, who declares his feelings for her. The boyar is killed and the beautiful lady is exiled in the tower of the Secu Monastery to undeservedly atone for sins she never committed (act I). Fifteen years later, her husband forgives her, acknowledging her innocence, but Ana refuses to return to him (act II). The unifying element, the reason behind their reconciliation is a storm that strikes out of nowhere, the two spouses returning to their initial feelings for each other (act III).

the libretto. In the three acts, the Bear, a character invented by the composer, becomes the storyteller who intervenes in the development of the prologue and epilogue. The action is built alternatively in the rural and urban environment, the language contains many idioms, irony being the most frequently used figure of speech. For example, when the Mother Goat leaves her kids home, asking them to repeat the famous chorus *Three kids with growing horns*, they chant it in a distorted manner, the protagonist thinking that they are trying to render “modern music” (Vasile, 2005, p. 270). The Wolf addresses the kids by means of an expression that was fashionable at the time, but was simplified in the context “Bonjour, Kids!” (Vasile, 2005, p. 270), the origin of which was the King’s famous way of greeting the people – “Bonjour, People!” (Vasile, 2005, p. 270). Similarly, when the Elder and the Middle kids become the Wolf’s prisoners, the latter triumphantly exclaiming “Come after me, kids, it’s lunch time” (Vasile, 2005, p. 273), the orchestra plays the *Marseillaise*, another irony addressed to the “ideals of the French Revolution” (Vasile, 2005, p. 273). But how can we explain the composer’s propensity for irony, parody, satire, addressed at a society which exaggerates in manners, in the use of French words, and other such ridiculous things, in the context of Alexandru Zirra’s sensitive artistic temperament, eminently inclined to the dramatic genre. Let us remember that, even though the opera was completed in 1938, it was staged in 1941, together with his first stage creation *Alexandru Lăpuşneanu*.

A positive attitude determined by the fact that, in the interwar period from 1940 to 1941, Alexandru Zirra was appointed as director of the Romanian Opera of Bucharest. This was a busy period for him as he worked hard to bring many of his colleagues’ works, from the national repertoire, into the limelight<sup>4</sup>.

Once he received the approval to stage his two personal creations, Alexandru Zirra proved, like on many other occasions, the decency and elegance necessary to withdraw from the management of this institution. Now we can ask ourselves: how many managers of professional artistic institutions would do the same today? It is difficult to answer this question.

Regardless, this opus can be perceived as an insurgence against officials<sup>5</sup> who, for no legitimate reason, postponed promoting Alexandru Zirra’s

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<sup>4</sup> *La seceriş* [Harvest] and *Seara mare* [Great Evening] by Tiberiu Brediceanu, *Cu dragostea nu-i de glumit* [Love is Not a Joke] by Constantin Nottara, *La piaţă* [At the Market] by Mihail Jora, the choreographic poem *Nunta în Carpaţi* [The Carpathian Wedding] by Paul Constantinescu, etc.

<sup>5</sup> It is surprising that, in the period from 1940 to 1941, Alexandru Zirra was involved in the management of the Opera from Bucharest, without resentment, even though in 1910, when he was offered the chance to participate in a competition at the Conservatory from Bucharest for the disciplines of harmony and composition, the artist having a consistent portfolio (completing the harmony treaty, 1908-1909 and creating composition works for which he would later receive the award of Master in Composition from the Conservatory of Milan), his destiny was not favourable. He competed against another young creator, Ion Nonna Otescu, who had

creations, which challenged him to create a stage parody. Beyond these extra-musical issues, the composer managed to create a perfect fusion between Creangă's plastic text, enriched with variations typical to the writer, and an amalgamated sonority which, according to Vasile Vasile, includes "children's folk songs, funeral songs, dance music, [...] ballad intonations, urban folklore, romance and songs inspired from erotic lyric poetry" (Vasile, 2005, p. 273).

### 5.6. *O făclie de Paști* [An Easter Torch], psychological opera

In the third decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more specifically in 1935, Alexandru Zirra focused his attention on Ion Luca Caragiale's psychological novella, *O făclie de Paști*. Such a theme was a fairly convincing argument for Alexandru Zirra to create a tense music, synthesizing various intonations: Romanian traditional music, Hebrew, psaltic music, amid a sense of fear that builds up in the music.

The conception for the libretto belongs to Alexandru Zirra who concentrated Caragiale's story in order to highlight a few moments: the violent conflict between Leiba Zibal the tavern owner and Gheorghe, act I; Gheorghe's revolt and desire for revenge, act II; Leiba Zibal's fright who kills Gheorghe on the night of Resurrection, act III (Cosmovici, 1984, p. 35).

Unlike Caragiale's novella, in which the author is known by his characteristic irony found in language, action and characters' behavior, in his opera, Zirra imbues the libretto with local colour, using Moldovan expressions, and giving up scenic details, the musical transposition of which would have created some difficulties.

The fact that peculiarities from Caragiale's novella are excluded or transfigured in Zirra's libretto, highlighting "a latent conflict which is, nonetheless, amplified by the main character's disease and excessive terror" (Cosmovici, 1984, p. 35), shows that the latter does not only have the special ability to capitalize on the essentials of a literary work for its better transposition in music, but also a natural tendency to connect the expressionist theme from international stage masterpieces, such as *Erwartung* by Arnold Schönberg, completed in 1909. It should be noted the Romanian stage reached thematic level only after a few decades, on the one hand, once with *Năpasta* [The Misfortune] by Sabin Drăgoi (which premiered in 1928) or *Păcat boieresc* [The Boyard's Sin] (1933) by Marțian Negrea and, on the other hand, with *O făclie de Paști* [An Easter Torch] by Alexandru Zirra.

In order to highlight the mottled atmosphere of the place where the action develops (the tavern from Podeni), the composer brings to the fore, at the

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graduated from *Schola Cantorum* and was supported at that time by the Romanian Royal House and, implicitly, enjoyed a greater appreciation. Even though Alexandru Zirra won the competition, the vacancy was filled by Ion Nonna Otescu. (This information was presented in an extended or concentrated manner in most of the bibliographical referenced cited).

beginning of the score, “the Sunday *hora* and the local traditional fiddler band” (Vasile, 2005, p. 255), he makes an obvious reference to Stravinsky’s amalgamated stage music creation.

The concern for achieving contrasts in the association and sequence of sources is obvious throughout this musical piece. While *the melodic idea of fright* is sung in the opening of the opus, which underwent many transformations, evolving as a leitmotif, Gheorghe’s aria, for instance, is created on the structure of the popular song *Foaie verde a bobului* (Vasile, 2005, p. 256), also transposed in the author’s symphonies. Finally, the stage and musical ambience changes paradoxically, in a violent contradiction between the tense moments of the libretto and the sacred choral music inspired from *Troparul Învierii* [Troparion of the Resurrection] (Vasile, 2005, p. 258).

Here is one of the unique manners of associating and overlapping two manifestations of the Schönbergian and Stravinskian Expressionism onto the Romanian stage, in the creations of an essentially lyrical composer. Combining different stylistic sources, resorting to a veristic vocality, extending the discourse onto ample sections – these are just some of the general features that determine us to include the opus within a Post-romantic synthesis framework.

## 6. Conclusions

### 6.1. Approach to stage creation

Even though the composer’s preference for the dramatic category entails a successful approach to historical musical drama, the use of other species in the genre (*lyrical opera*, *psychological opera*, *fairy-opera*), in which Alexandru Zirra offered representative opuses, must not be neglected.

It should be noted that, in the vocal dramatic area, an important role is played by a unique syncretic genre, the vocal-symphonic poem or *fairy-opera* for baritone, soprano, mixed choir, orchestra, ballet ensemble *Luceafărul* [The Morning Star], which is innovating through the correspondence between its text, embedded with philosophical meanings, and its post-romantic sonority. Alexandru Zirra’s debut as an innovative composer reflects, on the one hand, his capacity for synthesis, for response to various types of music and styles during the period of time when he continued his studies in Milan, and, on the other hand, the function of predicting modern features in his future works.

### 6.2. Conception on libretti

The composer created his libretti by himself, drawing mostly on historical themes, with two exceptions (the fairy-opera *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings] and the psychological opera *O făclie de Paști* [An Easter Torch]). This significant detail confers him more freedom in his creation of stage drama, of characters, the author rewriting the entire literary action on

many occasions in order to underline certain ideas or feelings, which he considered to be relevant for the music.

Regardless of whether he found inspiration in historical, psychological or children's literature, the composer metamorphosed the source, ennobling it and seeking to adapt it to the local context (bringing out the Moldavian dialect, typical expressions, inserting situations and actions with invented character names, well fitting in those specific dramatic fragments). This is an innovating approach of a creator endowed with sound literary and musical knowledge, which does not only reflect his relation with Wagner's manner of creating librettos, but also the idea of modernizing the Romanian lyrical theatre.

### **6.3. Conception on sonority in the international and Romanian stylistic context**

When it comes to the relation between Alexandru Zirra's operas and similar stage creations in the global context, we would like to point out that the emotionality present in his historical scores is mainly due to the fluctuating harmony he created, punctured by many modulated moments, as well as to the dramatic recitatives, which is an interesting combination between the *ariosos* full of Russian pathos in the manner of Mussorgsky from *Boris Godunov*, and of the lyrical, melodramatic effects typical of Italian scores from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi) and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (G. Puccini).

We likewise understand the national stage context of Alexandru Zirra's historical operas, starting from the importance given to leitmotif, to declamation in an incipient phase, to the subtle portrayal of characters, distinguishing features of Eduard Caudella's Romantic historical drama *Petru Rareș* (1889), to the reconfiguration of a legendary ambience, to the capitalization on folklore in the form of a citation or processed in *Pană Lesnea Rusalim* by Paul Constantinescu (1955), to the emphasis on lyricism in the drama *Apus de soare* [Sunset] by Mansi Barberis (1958), right down to the vast traditional musical drama with a heroic character, *Ion Vodă cel cumplit* [John 3<sup>rd</sup> the Terrible] by Gheorghe Dumitrescu (1958).

Furthermore, with regard to the creator's relation with the genre, perceived from an international perspective, the opera dedicated both to children and adults *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings] is intended as a continuation of the comedy of situation and action from the German fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel* (1893) by Engelbert Humperdinck or of the fantastic comedy from *Vulpișoara cea șireată* [The Cunning Little Vixen] (1924) by Leoš Janáček.

Some remarks ought to be made about language, given the fact that the methods used to create irony and parody, by distorting the rhythm, melody, harmony and/or orchestration, remain valid in Russian program or stage music, the apex being represented by Igor Stravinsky.

The reverberations in the national context occur especially in the area of the program instrumental creations *Două schițe simfonice: „Înmormântare la Pătrunjel”* și *„Paparudele”* [Two Symphonic Sketches: Funeral at Parsley's and Paparude] (1929) by Theodor Rogalski, *Suita pentru orchestră op. 2 „Șătrarii”* [Orchestral Suite Op. 2 “The Gypsies”] (1934) by Dinu Lipatti, *Tabloul simfonic „Gaida”* [“Gaida” Symphonic Picture] from *Trei dansuri românești* [Three Romanian Dances] (1950) by Theodor Rogalski. Opera remains one of the genres that will be tangentially affiliated with the Stravinskian direction in the local context. This is the case of the comedy *O noapte furtunoasă* [A Stormy Night] by Paul Constantinescu (1935, redone in 1950) followed by Alexandru Zirra's *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings], created in the same genre.

The similarity between the opera *O făclie de Paști* [An Easter Torch] and West European musical styles, i.e. Verism, Post-romanticism and partially Expressionism, attests to the creator's openness to synthesis music amid local musical resources. Furthermore, the combination of different stylistic overtones (folk, local folk music, Hebrew, psaltic and academic), the approach to a general traditional architecture, comprising acts and scenes that include a sequence of classical moments (recitative, arioso, monologue, interlude), yet are treated in extended sections of discourse, where the orchestration and harmony are not present only to add colour to the picture, but also to describe characters or situations taking place on stage, where the soloists' vocals create volutes of the intensity of sound in a Puccinian manner, all of which reveal a surprisingly creator, a musician capable of rallying to the synthesis Post-romantic style, yet maintain the sensitivity typical of Romanian music.

We are well aware of the fact that, even though we aimed at highlighting Alexandru Zirra's contribution to the national and global world of the stage, this desideratum has been only partially fulfilled in this research, given the fact that we have available only one score (*Alexandru Lăpușneanu*) accompanied by the related audition and recording of the *Capra cu trei iezi* [The Goat with Three Goatlings]. Nonetheless, we are confident that, once we fall into the possession of his other scores, and, especially, once with promoting Alexandru Zirra in performance halls, the entire bibliography dedicated to this musician will become the natural result of the contact with the his music. The reason we are saying this is that, despite the fact that 70 years have gone by since his passing, we are currently in the same ambivalent position as before: one of awe before an exceptionally talented musician, and of helplessness to fully respond to his creation.



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