Romanian Music in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

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Looking back, the Romanian school of composers—a school without a tradition (centuries behind West European culture in general and music in particular) that only arose as such in the twentieth century—was truly miraculous in its birth and rise. Taking seed at the same time as the widespread phenomenon of the national movements of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the Romanian school gradually meshed with the Western avant-garde only later to break away, thanks to its own highly original ideas and achievements. The innate qualities of Romanian spirituality—contemplativeness, a vocation for purification and essentialisation rooted in archaic folk sources, in Byzantine painting and liturgy, represented by the sculpture of Constantine Brancusi, the thought of Mircea Eliade, the musical explorations of Georges Enesco—fostered the creative originality of the second half of the twentieth century, which was praised by renowned critics such as Ulrich Dibelius, who in 1970 discovered to his astonishment: "modern Romanian rests on a broad and solid foundation such as exists in perhaps no other country," perceiving it as "a movement in full flow,"[1] and Harry Halbreich, who in 1983 argued: "the new Romanian school is the most fascinating phenomenon in European music in recent years."[2]

Georges Enesco was the first to break down the barriers of native provincialism, in the first half of the twentieth century, aspiring to an essentiality and universality in his musical means and message. The Byzantine tradition had an important word to say: its deep spirituality and symbolism were capable of conserving the "inner eye and ear," the gaze fixed beyond the palpable, surface reality; it had always been capable of capturing the hidden spirit

[1] Ulrich Dibelius, *Şansele muzicii româneşti*, in: *Prisma*, 1970.
[2] Harry Halbreich, Ana-Maria Avram, *Roumanie, terre du neuviéme ciel*, Bucharest: Axis Mundi, 1992, p. 2.

of things and striving toward the sublime. As such, Byzantine liturgical chant supplied Enesco with two of the fundamental aspects of his music: the *non-pulsatory state* and *monody* (see for example, *Prelude to Unison* in the *First Suite for Orchestra*). Another two features emerge and are validated by their archaic folk origin, which is stripped down to its essentials: *parlando-rubato rhythm* and *heterophony*, the second of which is a major archetypal category adopted by the Romanian school of composers via its founder and theorist of heterophony, Ștefan Niculescu.

The emphasis we have laid on Enesco's primacy when it comes to awareness and employment of heterophony is not accidental, nor is our emphasis on composer Ștefan Niculescu's "paternity" of the heterophonic direction in music, which was ignored by Pierre Boulez, for example, when he claimed that the syntax in question, incorporated in the concept of serialism, was his own discovery. Likewise, it is not generally known (or perhaps not sufficiently known) that Romanian composers made a primary and substantial contribution to the emergence and development of the spectral movement, to the recovery of the natural resonance of the musical note, and to the appearance of morphogenetic music in Romania (a compositional project undertaken in concordance with the principles of René Thom's theory of catastrophe), linked to the name Aurel Stroe since the 1960s.

Furthermore, against the backdrop of such spiritual traditions, of such innovations and discoveries of fundamental musical trajectories, an archetypal movement also took shape and came to prominence, whose aesthetics incorporated Neo-Platonist ideas and aimed to recover natural elements, timeless, essential and implicitly universal models, which, as Octavian Nemescu remarks, are as essential as "vitamins in the pure state." And it is not insignificant that archetypal music and theory, with all its antecedents and ramifications, arose as a result of attempts to bring into discussion the rediscovery of *meaning* in the artwork and of deeper meanings in particular, a discussion that united in a shared belief artists from different media:

music, painting, literature. It was in this spirit that in 1978, painter Marin Gherasim recorded in his creative journal: "I think that today we have to be able to answer not only the question, 'What do you know?' but also the question, 'What do you believe in?' Pure erudition is no longer enough. Art can no longer be an end, but the consequence of a mode of existence. A consequence of our deeper beliefs (…) The artist is no longer a jester or conjurer. He is not there to amuse other people, but to find his own truth. To find it for himself and also to share it with others. Art can then become an oasis of light, hope, certainty."[3]

Such too was the experience of great archetypal artist Constantine Brancusi, who held the extraordinary conviction that he was reviving mankind's spiritual and moral hopes and that the world could be "redeemed through art." Not through any kind of art, but only through an essential, archetypal art. "Look at my sculptures until you see them." This is a call to reflect, to seek a new initiatory gnosis that might transcend geographic space and historical time.

Accession to the archetype is "the idea that unites all Romanians and they share it with nobody else," observed Harry Halbreich. As a result, archetypal art and music arises as a Romanian solution to postmodernity, absorbing the fundamental, essential tendencies, achievements and dimensions of the creative movements that precede it and anticipate it on the same terrain of spiritual vocation. There have been numerous reasons for the fact that it has had difficulty gaining international currency: political and economic reasons, as well as the present-day relativism of values, aesthetic egalitarianism, the invasion of kitsch and mass culture, which smother originality, mixing up options to the point where axiological criteria slip away. Nevertheless, for those who still believe in its (by no means accidental) destiny, the dialogue of the artist is a dialogue with time, with the future, with posterity, rather than a dialogue of the present, a dialogue with the mass media and the consumer.

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[3] Marin Gherasim, *Mărturii ale unui demers*, in: *Arta*, nos. 9-10/1980, p. 65.

Obviously, not every composition in Romanian music is extraordinary. Obviously, in making a cross-section of such a extremely diverse subject, criteria of selection and unwritten hierarchies are at work, in order to obtain the necessary decanting of the major ideas launched and materialised as the musical compositions to which we refer, following a trail that sets out from conserved aspects of the national folk tradition, which marked the birth of the Romanian school of composers (which are less original, given the multitude of such phenomena in countries lacking a previous cultural base), moving through the influences assimilated from Western music (more often than not adapted to a new spirituality and inventiveness), and finally reaching original movements, tendencies, genres and aesthetics, which take seed from and within Romanian music, many of them with their own distinctive reliefs and long-term impetus.

For, just as Ștefan Niculescu remarks, with the intention of re-evaluating the true visionary merits of Enesco, which over the course of time nourished the Romanian school, allowing it to take shape and develop: "Enesco's contribution to the art of our century was and unfortunately still is dissimulated within a traditional, national framework, which has constituted the main impediment to its unanimous recognition,"[4] so too the original and deeply manifested aspirations of Romanian music prove to be universal, tending toward the prefiguration of an integrating, holistic, essentialising, symbolic, meta-artistic spirit.

[4] Ştefan Niculescu, *Reflecţii despre muzică*, Bucharest: Editura Muzicală, 1980. p. 179.