

## 15. ANTONIN CIOLAN – THE TEACHER, THE FOUNDER OF ORCHESTRAS, THE MASTER CONDUCTOR

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**Abstract:** *The founder of a conducting style, who organised orchestras in two important musical centres in Romania (Iași and Cluj), "the patriarch of conductors", respected and praised by George Enescu, Sergiu Celibidache or Erich Bergel, was a multilateral personality of exceptional merits as a teacher of orchestra, orchestra conducting, harmony and counterpoint; having founded several prestigious religious choral ensembles, organised and led musical teaching and concert institutes, Antonin Ciolan deserves to be brought to the awareness of more recent generations of researchers and audiences, as his historic achievements indicate.*

**Key words:** *musicians of Iași; conductor; Antonin Ciolan; George Enescu; Conservatoire*

### 1. Introduction

"Ciolanissimo"? It is a witticism known to senior musicians in Romanian symphonic orchestras, who were active until the 2000s. First, there was "toscanissimo", which combined a name (Toscanini) and an expert term indicating the ultra-fast tempo of a musical work: *prestissimo*. Arturo Toscanini's style was characterised by its dynamics, vivaciousness – by way of temperament and the proverbial instrumental technique of American orchestras; in this case, the prestige of the NBC ensemble and the proud, authoritarian Italian's fame had motivated that orchestra to reach high performance standards. But why was "toscanissimo" translated into Romanian as "ciolanissimo"? Similarly, because the tempos chosen by Antonin Ciolan for the movements of symphonic works surpassed what was customary in Romanian conducting practice. Why was this the case with Antonin Ciolan? An explanation could take his early childhood years into account. His mother recounted that "when he was around 3 or 4, he woke up at 2 o'clock in the morning, went over to the piano and played a march he had heard the previous day."<sup>178</sup> Marches and the brass-band repertoire would impress Antonin Ciolan both in his native Iași, where he was born on 1 January 1883, and in the town of Târgu Neamț, where he made his unexpected debut by supplanting a drummer<sup>179</sup>. The link to military music was kept alive in the first years of his youth, when the future "patriarch of conductors", as he was dubbed, led the orchestra and the brass band of the 4th Regiment of Hunters of the Romanian army.

### 2. Discussions

Other "tributaries" to the conducting style branded "Antonin Ciolan" can be considered to be the years of study in the rigorous German schools of Dresden, Leipzig, Berlin and the model of the extroverted conductor, represented by

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<sup>178</sup> Gheorghe Mușat, *Antonin Ciolan, inegalabilul maestru al baghetei*, Editura „Ecou Transilvan”, 2012, p.16

<sup>179</sup> Ibidem

Arthur Nikisch. The three pillars of the style cultivated by Antonin Ciolan his entire lifetime – rigour, Nikish-type vivaciousness and the inner tumult proper to that other German conducting teacher, Hans von Bülow – were always noticed and evoked by the musicians in the orchestras he worked with and can be observed upon listening to extant recordings.

Much like Titu Maiorescu and Mihail Jora, to name only two illustrious names, Antonin Ciolan was so appreciated in Germany that he could have had an exceptional destiny there (professor Hans von Bülow proposed in 1917 that he replace him on the tour of Riga, Sankt Petersburg and Kiev, while the Dresden Conservatory offered him the department vacated by the death of Felix Draeseke). However, the young Romanian musician returned to his country. Those were times when patriotism still had a meaning...This is how a favourable period in the musical life of Iași began, as Antonin Ciolan reorganised the Conservatory orchestra, founded choral associations and was consequently present as a conductor of and pianist with the orchestra and the choir of the "Musical Society" during the intervals and in the musical performances at the National Theatre from 1914 to 1916.

On 17 October 1918, during the administrative relocation to Iași caused by World War I events, the meeting to constitute the "George Enescu" society took place. The twenty concerts of the first season were conducted by Antonin Ciolan and by Mircea Bârsan, two of the Society founders. In the following season, Ciolan was the only concert conductor, while being ascribed the position of general music director by George Enescu for the period 1919 to 1922. In his organisational activities, Antonin Ciolan also supported the rhythmic formula of "prestissimo", immediately including the Opera and Choral departments in programmes, beside the existing symphonic section. The concert programmes of those years evince manager and conductor Antonin Ciolan's orientation towards ample and difficult orchestral works, like Beethoven's 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> symphonies, Tchaikovsky's 4<sup>th</sup>, Dvořák's 9<sup>th</sup> "From the New World", Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun", César Franck's "Symphony in D minor". Given George Enescu's well-known work ethic and passionate devotion to music, the lines that he wrote in June 1922 to Antonin Ciolan were no mere politeness, but a recognition of the latter's qualities as a musician and organiser: *"I wish to stress my entire gratitude to Mr. Antonin Ciolan for his remarkable artistic activity, for the diligence and devotion to the musical cause, which he has victoriously defended for longer than three years as head of the Symphonic Society, that honours me by bearing my name. I wish Mr. Ciolan many more years of fruitful work for our common good."*<sup>180</sup>.

Should we add that Antonin Ciolan also headed the Conservatoire from 1919 to 1922, we can easily imagine that success on so many levels drew animosity and envy. Enescu's prestige and his trust in Ciolan's musical and organisational skills did not matter, nor did the high quality of the symphonic programmes he conducted. Mircea Bârsan's professional envy, a conductor who thought of

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<sup>180</sup> Gheorghe Mușat, *op.cit.*, p.49

himself as being equally good, and backstage intrigue "spilt over", as Antonin Ciolan was accused of over-promoting Russian works and privileging German music: in some circles, concert performances of works by Bach, Händel, Schubert and Wagner were looked upon as exaggerated care for foreign music. Naturally, the officials of the time used this opportunity to discontinue the subsidies for the Society orchestra, which led to it being disbanded. After several interventions in which he extolled Antonin Ciolan's merits, in May 1923 George Enescu expressed his disappointment in an interview given to Iași newspaper "Opinia":

*"The conflict at the heart of the Society upsets me greatly. Without giving any specification or names, it has scandalised me as a Romanian, who hurts at the impression made before foreign eyes. People without any calling have meddled in; the result is complete disharmony at the heart of the Society."*<sup>181</sup>

The consequence was unfortunate: the dispute between the Society and the Conservatoire determined Enescu and other good musicians' departure. Antonin Ciolan's "monopoly" ended by him being sidelined from the leadership of the Society and the Conservatoire. His wish to lead an orchestra was fulfilled again once the Symphonic Orchestra of the Tătărași Athenaeum was founded. The first concert took place on the evening of 13 March 1925. This orchestra was equally short-lived. The continuous rivalry between Mircea Bârsan and Antonin Ciolan came to the fore once again.

The first confirmation of the saying "a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country" came in Antonin Ciolan's life on 14 July 1927, when the Symphonic Society, the City of Chișinău and the Board of the Musical Society named him General Manager of the Music School. At that date, in fact, it was a confirmation on the administrative level, as his professional value had been proven in Bessarabia as early as 1921-1922, when he had conducted the orchestra of the Musical Society in Iași in a great number of concerts and festivals in Chișinău, Cernăuți, Bălți, Soroca and Ismail. Antonin Ciolan was enjoying well-deserved respect, also expressed in the letters addressed to him by officials and musicians of Chișinău and Cernăuți. The concerts had mostly featured works by classic Russian composers.

Another bright moment in Antonin Ciolan's life occurred on 27 May 1934, when he was celebrated upon turning 50. Representatives of the city authorities, of the Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, of the Tătărași Athenaeum and of the Trade Union of Instrumentalists uttered appreciative words about Antonin Ciolan's efforts to organise a highly qualitative musical life in Iași through the concerts of the symphonic orchestras he conducted. *"It was a manifestation of spontaneous sympathy occasioned in the history of Moldovan musical culture by the public of Iași, who filled the hall of the National Theatre to the brim. When the curtain was lifted, the choir conducted by one of the maestro's students, George Pascu, intoned "Happy Birthday", while the public acclaimed the birthday boy and enthusiastic students threw flowers from the balcony. [...]"*

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<sup>181</sup> Gheorghe Mușat, *op.cit.*p.65

*After the concert, the same enthusiastic students carried the maestro on their arms amidst cheers from the crowd and brought him over to a gilded carriage, as the choir sang "Happy birthday" once more."* <sup>182</sup>

We need to mention Antonin Ciolan's contribution to another segment of the musical life of Iași as conductor of the St. Spiridon Church choir and of the Metropolitan Cathedral choir. In fact, Antonin Ciolan is considered to be Gavril Musicescu's follower in matters of choir conducting – as Musicescu had founded the choir of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași on 15 January 1876. In his turn, Antonin Ciolan, much appreciated and assisted by Metropolitan Nicodim, conducted this choir for eight years without wages, promoting Romanian sacred music at a high artistic level and offering his apprentices, students of the Academy for Music and Dramatic Art, the opportunity to try out their talent in leading a vocal ensemble. Having become well respected personalities of Romanian musical culture, some evoked the artistic quality of the two choirs, and especially of the St. Spiridon Church choir, led by Antonin Ciolan from 1921 to 1938. I'm referring to musicologist George Pascu and to conductor Emanuel Elenescu (coincidence: both of them graduates of the National College "Mihail Sadoveanu" in Iași, like their maestro).

Antonin Ciolan's return as a musician to the right Moldavian bank of the river Prut equally meant another victory and a new nightmare. On 1 October 1942, he was named General Music Director of the Odessa Opera by the Civil Governor of Transnistria, at the same time upholding his didactic activity at the Conservatoire in Iași by decision of the Ministry of National Culture and the Cults, Department of Higher Education. Antonin Ciolan's merits as consummate master of the opera repertoire were recognised, as his proverbial work ethic, passion and rigour made possible the production of 24 opera and ballet performances in merely one and half years.

1942 meant a further two events for Antonin Ciolan: the first performance of the much desired Opera of Iași: in the autumn of that year he conducted Puccini's "Boema". The autumn of 1942 also saw Antonin Ciolan's debut as a conductor for the radio. On 2 November, upon inauguration of regional channel "Moldova" he conducted the orchestra of the Academy of Music and Dramatic Art in playing the overture to Eduard Caudella's opera "Petru Rareș", Sabin Drăgoi's "Divertiment rustic" (Rural Divertimento) and George Enescu's "Rhapsody no. 1 in A major". Since on 9 October 1942 the "Moldova" Philharmony of Iași was inaugurated, Antonin Ciolan was programmed by way of course to conduct the newly-founded orchestra during the first season of 1942-1943.

I was stating above that Antonin Ciolan's 1942 return to Odessa as general manager of the Opera meant yet another professional success but also a dramatic moment in his life. His strictly musical activity and participation in September 1942 in the inauguration of the "Liberation Tower in Bessarabia", built in Chișinău, were important counts for the communist regime installed in Romania

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<sup>182</sup> Gheorghe Mușat, *op.cit.*, p.121, 123

in August 1944. His was first arrested on 19 October for three and a half months, and a second time on 13 April 1945, as he was considered a war criminal. As a consequence of memos and the evidence of the unsolicited, strictly musical activity at the Odessa Opera, four months later the authorities of the time exonerated Antonin Ciolan of all accusations. In his defence, former students of the Conservatory in Iași, players and singers of the Odessa Opera sent numerous memos to the Ministry of Culture, requesting the musician's acquittal.

A last trial was leaving the Iași of so many successes and fights. In 1947, his native city definitely lost an artist and a highly competent, hard-working and passionate organiser of musical life. For two years he worked as a principal conductor of the Bucharest Philharmony orchestra, while settling down in Cluj in 1949. For the second time and for ever, Antonin Ciolan was meant to experiment that unwritten "law": "a prophet is not without honour, save in his own country".

It was then that the conductor's national prestige began to be consolidated through reviews published in the Bucharest press, through the frequent broadcasts of concerts from the "George Enescu" Philharmony and the "Radiotelevision". Recordings and highly valuable video documents date from that period. Of course, the public of Bucharest was won over by performances of concert-symphonic works representing musical classicism and romanticism, especially Beethoven and Tchaikovsky's symphonies. "Antonin Ciolan's Triumph" was the title of a review published in 1966 under Radu Gheciu's signature, an infrequent title in reference to Romanian conductors from the 1970s. Antonin Ciolan was also invited to conduct in the "George Enescu" International Festival, edition of 1967, when he offered a version of the great composer's Symphony no. 1 in E-flat major, op. 13.

The last important period for Antonin Ciolan and the musical life of a city was 1949-1970, when he was active in Cluj. At another wintry moment for Romanian musical culture, marked by the dissolution of the "Ardealul" Philharmony in Cluj-Napoca (1949) and of the Conservatory in Iași (1950), not only did Antonin Ciolan survive professionally, but he was able to manifest himself fully by having an orchestra at his disposal once more, as he was named principal conductor of the Hungarian Opera ensemble in Cluj-Napoca. The respect and the attention enjoyed here were complete. He had ideal conditions to form a symphonic orchestra: all musicians were young, they did not yet master a particular repertoire, they lacked, of course, a performance style. Not only did Antonin Ciolan model the new orchestra through opera works, but also through symphonic literature, which built the musicians' sonic and practical culture. The long series of symphonic concerts held by the orchestra of an opera theatre was unique in Romanian musical life.

Of course, Antonin Ciolan's teaching experience was capitalised on in the conducting and orchestra classes of the Conservatory in Cluj-Napoca, while beginning with 1955, when the Philharmony was founded, the venerable but tireless musician would start the last and most fruitful period of his double activity as a conductor and a pedagogue, who could now count on continuity.

After a first series of conductors that he had begun to form in Iași (Sergiu Celibidache, Carlo Felice Cillario, Dinu Niculescu, Florica Dimitriu, Anatol Chisadji, Emanuel Elenescu), a group of youngsters who would equally assert themselves internationally followed (I mention here Erich Bergel and Emil Simon). In his later years, Antonin Ciolan received much proof of admiration and respect. I retain here only fragments of the letter received from Sergiu Celibidache on 14 July 1968. On this occasion, Celibidache confessed in his direct emotional style: *"Your lines have filled my heart with joy. But why did you start with "Sir"? I liked it better when you called me "dear" and "boy" in Iași and please believe I haven't changed. Then, like today, I considered you the greatest Romanian conductor. And among the impressions from the country that I took with me upon leaving and which somehow influenced my adolescence and development, the smooth image of Antonin Ciolan with this intransigence, patience and talent were decisive."*<sup>183</sup>

Antonin Ciolan's last departure took place in December 1970, when he headed for his native Iași – the Iași of victories, fights, adversity and success. If it is true that he continued to live in his colleagues and disciples' memory (Remus Tzincoca and Dumitru M. Botez need to be remembered here), it is equally true that passing decades slowly brought oblivion. It is Gheorghe Mușat's merit, a musician with the Cluj Philharmony orchestra for several decades, Moldovan by birth and musical studies, to have acted in order to preserve the memory of Antonin Ciolan, to document his life and artistic achievements. Taking part in the renovation of the monument in the cemetery "Eternitatea" of Iași, drafting the impressing volume "Antonin Ciolan, inegalabilul maestru al baghetei" (Antonin Ciolan, unparalleled master of the baton), published in 2012 at publishing house "Ecou transilvan", are gestures that deserve every respect. The volume impresses through the huge number of information and documents, many of them novel, which are made available to researchers and the interested public. This editorial opus can stimulate musicians who may have to analyse Antonin Ciolan's conducting concept.

The sonic documents bearing his signature prove the importance that he attached to musical phrasing turned orchestral. The ideas, cells and melodic motifs displayed by an instrumental section or polyfonically are intertwined in a clear, distinctive discourse of the ensemble writing, easily discernable upon close listening. The musical-sonic substance in Antonin Ciolan's recordings is never a uniform paste. On the contrary, each instrumental section expresses their melodic idea in a true art of the dialogue. Similarly, instrumental solos are minutely drawn, "reading" as pleasantly as one would a manuscript of by-gone centuries, kept between monastic walls.

In Antonin Ciolan's performing works there is an external throb that does not influence in any way the style and the spirit of Tschaikovsky's music; on the contrary, it underlines its extrovert attributes. If I were to compare the rhythm, the external dynamics of Antonin Ciolan's version with his former disciple

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<sup>183</sup> Gheorghe Mușat, *op.cit.*, p.292

Sergiu Celibidache's imposing, internalised development, different concepts would be identified: atuned to the brass-band repertoire from an early age, educated according to the rhythmic rigour of the turn-of-century German school, dynamic Antonin Ciolan was never touched by military strictness. The marching rhythm in Tschaikovsky's symphonies is marked by youthful, vital dynamics, which are perfectly viable now, in the first quarter of the 21st century.

The lyrically somber inner climate displaying an almost dramatic, majestic discourse foreign to fast, Brahms-specific, tempos was represented by Antonin Ciolan and the Cluj-Napoca Philharmony orchestra as early as the first notes of Symphony no. 1 in C minor, opus 68. No sooner than the last section of the final movement does the romantic melodic energy, also expressed through a dynamic tempo, reveal once again person and musician Antonin Ciolan's vital, solar and clear spirit. But only to the extent that author Johannes Brahms also agrees. The performance is revealing as to octogenarian Antonin Ciolan's admirably agile maturity. The fusion of force and vitality with noble lyricism devoid of the slightest exaggeration is impressive, with the musical result striking less experienced listeners, while offering intellectual and mental comfort to cultivated music lovers and musicians.

### **3. Conclusions**

Antonin Ciolan is owed the particular personality of the full, bright and mature sound of the Cluj-Napoca Philharmony orchestra, which from 1961 to 1970 was equal in value not only to the symphonic ensemble of the Bucharest Philharmony but to foreign orchestras as well, should we set out to compare different recordings of the same works. This explains George Enescu and Sergiu Celibidache's respect or the success with foreign audiences, where up to three encores would be demanded. It also explains Antonin Ciolan's presence in the noble "family" of orchestra artisans, which, beside Celibidache, also featured Ion Baci, architect of the Iași Philharmony orchestra: in the 1980s, another regional Romanian orchestra that had swiftly gained the status of an internationally valid symphonic ensemble. Upon listening again to the historic 20<sup>th</sup> century recordings of conductor Antonin Ciolan, we can only hope that they will be transferred into modern data storage formats as soon as possible, as their documentary and pionieering value recommends.

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