

10. THE CONTRABASS. THE PROCESS OF HIS APPEARANCE AND CONSECRATION IN ROMANIAN MUSIC

Săndel Smărăndescu³⁴⁹

Abstract: *The plurality of aesthetic-musical currents such as French impressionism, Austro-German expressionism, national schools of composition focused on modal sound languages (initially ethnophonic and later totally “personalized”), to which will be added the acutely contemporary returns to already recognized compositional manners such as neo-baroque, neo-classical sound projects, etc., emerging from the great trunk of European post-romanticism, outline a practically unlimited stylistic horizon, offered to the creative imagination of artists through new sound vibrations, dedicated to the contrabass instrument.*

Key words: *contrabass, Romanian music, music history*

1. Introduction

In European musical culture, the appearance and improvement of musical instruments, regardless of the sound emission method (strings, wind instruments, percussion, etc.) depended to a large extent on the requirements of musical practices developed during different stylistic eras, but also of the existence of virtuoso instrumentalists who, over time, in collaboration with brilliant luthiers, have also finalized the instrument construction technique.

Since the early Baroque period, the compositional formula of the basso continuo has been unanimously accepted, used for the purpose of harmonic-rhythmic support of the content of musical creations. With the advent of larger instrumental ensembles, among the instruments that performed this function such as the lute, organ, harp, spinet or theorba, we also find an ancestor of today's contrabass. It could be found in a multitude of forms that varied in size, construction, tuning and especially in name.

Regarding the “family tree” of the contrabass, there are still today some researchers who claim that it belongs to the violin family, and others, the majority in number, claim that the contrabass belongs to the family of da gamba viols. Among the arguments of the latter, we list the tuning and the number of strings used since the appearance of the instrument (the descendants of the violin family had three or at most four strings, tuned in fifths, while those from the calf family were endowed with six strings) and the support of that instrument in during the interpretation it was done by resting him on his knees or the floor in a quasi-vertical position.

It is true that in the configuration of the modern contrabass, for certain models of the sound box, construction elements have been “borrowed” from the violin family³⁵⁰, such as the specific shape of the sound box, resulting from the adoption

³⁴⁹ Interpreter instrumentalist, “George Enescu” Philharmonic, Associate Professor PhD., National University of Music, București, România, email: s_smarandescu@yahoo.com

³⁵⁰ Regarding the shape of the instrument, there are two construction models: a) the one specific to the violin where the resemblance of the contrabass to this instrument is greater, but usually, this option involves difficulties of accessibility in the high positions (daumen) of playing the contrabass; b) the one characteristic of da gamba viols: the upper part of the sound box is elongated upwards, the hollows of the “C”s of the body of the instrument have no corners. This construction model is preferred by contrabass players who have difficulty accessing the upper positions (daumen) of the contrabass.

of narrow eclipses, the convex back (convex) and the cutting of the holes on the face of the instrument according to the pattern of the letter f, all of which favor the production of a strong sound. To these elements of the process of perfecting the body of the instrument, we can add, from the perspective of the evolution of the emission mechanism, the disappearance of the links from semitone to semitone on the keyboard, links characteristic of da gamba violas, but above all the discovery of more and more perfected technical possibilities.

2. The contrabass in European musical creation

The contrabass of the Viennese classical period was called a **violone** and resembled the viola da gamba. However, at the beginning of the 19th century, its identity was fully crystallized and its status as an indispensable musical instrument for the symphony orchestra had been consecrated, although its role in the configuration of the musical text had remained predominantly rhythmic-harmonic. As a solo instrument, its affirmation was possible thanks to the talent, inventiveness and mastery of virtuoso contrabass players belonging to the Italian school of interpretation, such as **Domenico Dragonetti** (1763-1846) or **Giovanni Bottesini** (1821-1889).

A few decades later, at the beginning of the 20th century, the famous contrabassist **Serge Koussevitzky** (1874-1951) stood out in Russia through his soloist, composer and later conductor activity. Of course, we can also list numerous other exponents of the interpretive art specific to the contrabass, belonging not only to the Italian or Russian schools, but also to the French, German, Czech or Austrian schools. By recalling them, however, we would go far beyond the space intended for this introductory chapter.

It is important to mention that the moment of the foundation of the Czech school by **Wenzel Hause** (1764-1847) meant the affirmation of the modern contrabass school whose successor is also the current contrabass school in Romania. The process of transmitting this priceless didactic treasure was achieved through the exchange of baton between the teacher and his disciple who, in turn, became a teacher, thus contributing to the cyclical propagation of the contrabass teaching methodology.

Therefore, this “family tree” of the modern Romanian contrabass school has its roots in Prague represented by the exponent mentioned above, W. Hause, followed at the chair by **Joseph Hrabe** (1851-1901), then **Franz Simandl** (1840 - 1912) and he trained at the Prague school but who settled in Austria, laid the foundations of the contrabass teaching methodology as a professor at the Vienna Conservatory. The Austrian contrabass school represented by Fz. Simandl trained **Eduard Madensky** (1877-1923) and he was the teacher of Joseph Prunner (1886-1969) who came to Romania in 1911 and founded the Romanian contrabass school. We will present in more detail these last three great teachers, precursors of our contrabass school.

Franz Simandl (1840-1912) is the pedagogue who made the most thorough methodological contribution to the study of the contrabass. All this didactic literature is currently and today used all over the world, and his New Method for the contrabass is considered the “Bible” for all those who dedicate themselves to the

study of this instrument, whose expressive resources are still not fully exploited.

Fz. Simandl was born on August 1, 1840, in Blatna (Bohemia) in a family of poor musicians³⁵¹. He graduated from the Prague Conservatory in 1861 with Josef Hrabe as his teacher. After finishing his studies, for 8 years, during which he performed his military service, he continued his musical activity with passion and dedication, both as an instrumentalist and as a conductor. He performed as first contrabassist of the Vienna Opera Orchestra and later, starting in 1969, he was also appointed professor at the Vienna Conservatory of Music (where he taught contrabass until 1910).

Later, he gave up his position in the Opera orchestra in favor of his employment with the prestigious Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Between 1860 and 1910 he worked as a choir conductor at the Concordia Verein. The fame of the virtuoso contrabass led the Bayreuth Opera to invite him to sing, as first contrabass, at the “Wagner” festivals for more than a decade. As an instrumental soloist but also as a tenor, Fz. Simandl was trained in numerous cultural events, performed on prestigious European concert stages.

From his rich literature dedicated to the contrabass we can mention: The new method for the contrabass pp. I-II (edited in 1871), nine notebooks from the volume Die Hohne Schule which represent collections of pieces for the contrabass;³⁵² in Notebook 9 you can find the most important collections of studies of this great teacher – the 30 studies and another 24 Studies entitled Gradus ad Parnassum, still used today in all contrabass schools.

Another exceptional contrabass artist, direct disciple of Fz. Simandl, it was **Eduard Madensky**. Born in Vienna on September 20, 1877, he will work as an instrumentalist starting in 1899 in the Royal Court Opera Orchestra. The future will make his name similar to that of “virtuoso contrabass player”, all the more so since the artist seemed predestined by nature to reach the highest steps of possible artistic perfection.

Endowed with a good musical training, Madensky, at the age of 14 - in 1891 - entered the Vienna Conservatory where, at first, he took violin lessons with Maxincah. His music theory teachers were Prossintz and Stocker.³⁵³ In 1892, on his own impulse, he chose the contrabass as his main instrument. His teacher is Bro. Simandl, in whose class in 1898 he graduated from the Conservatory, obtaining the diploma of merit.

During his military training, he often had the opportunity to perform as a soloist. In 1899, at the contrabass competition organized by the Royal Court Opera in Vienna, the competition chaired by Dr. Hans Richter and the director of the prestigious institution, the composer and conductor Gustav Mahler, among 21 competitors, obtained his appointment to the Royal Court orchestra. Thus freed from material worries, he devotes himself to soloist and compositional activity, writing mainly for his instrument. In November 1903, together with the singer of the Royal Court, Betty Schubert, he established himself as a soloist enjoying, on stage, a great

³⁵¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Simandl, accessed on 26. 03. 2012

³⁵² The collection includes works signed not only by Simandl or other famous contrabassists such as: Hrabe J., Schwabe O., Misek A., but especially by famous composers such as Bach, Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart and others.

³⁵³ As, during the same period, George Enescu also attended the courses of the Viennese conservatory, it is possible that the two future great virtuosos participated, together, in the theoretical lessons of the renowned masters.

success in front of a large and demanding Viennese public, a success also attested in the press comments of the time. Also, outside of Vienna, in Nürnberg, Brixen, Innsbruck, etc., he works as a soloist and his interpretations will be praised and unanimously appreciated. In 1909, E. Madensky was appointed contrabass soloist of the Viennese Court Opera.

To complete and concisely conclude an artistic biography of E. Madensky, the comment of the Viennese musicologist R. M. Mayrhofer becomes particularly edifying: "E. Madensky, from early childhood showed a special musical sense. He received a complete artistic education from Prof. Franz Simandl at the Vienna Conservatory and graduated in 1898 with a diploma of merit. For him, however, the last day of school was only the beginning of individual study and artistic animation for the purpose of perfection to research and explore the sovereign mastery of soloist resources, a rare characteristic of this strange instrument. Today, in all the vigor of youth and physically favored for wielding the heavy instrument, he strives to continually improve himself.

Not long after his first appearance on the stage as a soloist, he won the hearts of all musical circles, as already in November 1903 he presented a concert as a soloist in front of 2,000 enraptured audiences in the great music hall of Vienna. Thunderous applause followed after each piece in the rich program. The entire press praises him because he justified the desire to present his art beyond the stages of Vienna. Up until now, contrabass soloists, in order to avoid the technical difficulties encountered, have tried to use instruments with smaller dimensions, similar to the cello, which significantly reduces the timbre or intensity of the sound. We can convince ourselves of the perfect solo performance made with Madensky's original contrabass.

The indescribable weight of the technique seems to be easily overcome and thus the full timbre and full intensity of the sound is obtained, all the more so since it also covers the baritone register but also part of the violin register (four octaves in total) which is predominant in equally. The huge distances and the appreciable thickness of the strings, especially in fast passages, favor the partial blurring of the intonation. Madensky, however, overcomes these difficulties with such superiority that to the listener, small deviations seem natural, and this certainty has a striking effect even in the harmonics. In cantilenas, through the sweetness and warmth of the sound as well as the richness of the nuances, he will be a dangerous competitor not only for cellists but also for violinists.

To this expressive singing, to this prolonged sound, to these increases and decreases in different shades, he owes perhaps to the unique art of conducting the bow which, of course, cannot be surpassed. Taking into account that Madensky, in order to achieve the specific intensity of the sound, uses a technique and an interpretive art that seeks to overcome all the difficulties stubbornly imposed by the unusually large instrument, obliges us to name him as the first soloist representative of the contrabass. It is hoped that Madensky, as a result of his artistic ability, his comprehensive musical knowledge and culture, will devote himself to a much wider sphere, and will also be active as a pedagogue. His compositions for contrabass are:

1. Dreams – with piano accompaniment
2. Souvenir – with piano accompaniment
3. Andante – with piano accompaniment

Manuscripts:

1. Pastoral – with piano accompaniment
2. Zigeuneweisen – with orchestral accompaniment
3. Andantes
4. Duo for violin and contrabass with piano
5. Tarantella with piano accompaniment (it was successfully presented by Romanian performers).
6. Concerto in three parts with orchestra and 50 daily exercises”³⁵⁴

Publishing House Louis Ouertel Hannover

3. The contrabass in the Romanian school of composition – the contribution of Filip Lazăr

The Romanian school of composition “grows itself by assimilating the conquests of several foreign musical schools, which causes the influences as a whole to be attenuated by confrontation, to annihilate in the value of the young sapling grafted onto the multi-secular Romanian trunk of popular creation”.³⁵⁵ The statement of the distinguished academician O. L. Cosma generically covers the events that take place in the field of purely instrumental Romanian music, the genres circumscribed to it having a slower evolution than the vocal genres - since the compositional approach proposed the adaptation to the classical patterns of an original content, most often by ethnophonic origins.

However, the indicated conditioning is minor because the crystallization process of established instrumental forms is quite fast. Although the Romanian musical school is relatively young compared to the multi-secular European course, its founders will escalate with impetuosity the intermediate stages reaching ways of expression with a strong identity of ethos that will culminate with the monumental Enescien masterpieces. This phenomenon is also due to existing similarities between European and Romanian cultural processuality, connections established at the level of the impact that dance had in the evolution of purely instrumental musical thinking (see for example the mosaic alternation in terms of content in pre-classical instrumental suites).

The idea, beautiful and captivating as a hermeneutic approach, launched by the composer and musicologist Romeo Ghircoiașu at the beginning of the 60s (20th century) is developed by its author in a constructivist sense. So, through the instrumental music mostly intended for dance, Romanian music evolved in two ways:

1. It was able to overcome the Romanian environment in order for its elements to circulate far, in the space of Central and Eastern Europe, within the countless economic, social, political or cultural exchanges and relations.³⁵⁶

³⁵⁴ Text taken from a classroom program in the personal library of prof. univ. Ion Cheptea. The translation belongs to prof. Stefan Husz.

³⁵⁵ Octavian Lazăr Cosma, *Hronicul muzicii românești*, vol. IV, *Romantismul*, București, Editura Muzicală, 1976, p. 304

³⁵⁶ Romeo Ghircoiașu, *Contribuții la istoria muzicii românești*, vol. I, București, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor din R.P.R., 1963, p. 179

2. At the same time, it allowed the assimilation of some styles of musical thought, originating from the West, thus preparing our approach to the forms of classical music”.

Formed in the traditional musical academies of the West, Romanian composers understood and assimilated the European sound language (in its specific morphology and syntax) but, as in any acquisition of a project outside their own cultural space, they could not think and imagine directly in its terms, were unable to discover his inventive possibilities capable of leading to the configuration of truly original scores. Epigonism develops inherently in the field of creation, when the insertion between tradition – represented by a gradual approach, of creative essence – and assimilation, based on some theories of a certain creative phenomenology (in the present case, the Western musical one) is in a labile relationship, stabilized mainly by postulating the supremacy of the architectural parameter.

This stage cannot be bypassed; necessary objective, it is gradually overcome through persistent collective groping against the background of which, over time, distinct stylistic trajectories can be detached, with a vigorous creative potential, including the tendency to create new architectural patterns, to discover other sources of sound expression, etc. . And from the perspective of a historical-aesthetic process, this was the solution that the majority of the representatives of the National Music Schools, including the Romanian one, will adopt, their representatives relying on the traditional resources of their musical folklore that they wanted to integrate, as a sound emblem of their national identity in the dynamic reality of European musical literature.

Monodic and predominantly vocal, folklore will constitute one of the generally accepted ways of groping Romanian musical creativity, becoming a benchmark by which national symphonic and instrumental creation and more will be evaluated for a long time. In the conditions of the production of multiple artistic mutations, propagated with unlimited freedom in the first half of the century. XX, in fact, the emphasis is on finding ways to reformulate European musical thinking and for an “inventive” artist, popular melos can be “the starting point of an important work if the generative elements are able to conceive the multiple transformations of thought”.³⁵⁷

But marking the originality, the unmistakable stylistic identity of the Romanian musical creation will not be limited to the exploitation of the ethnophonic thematic-melodic concept, but, starting from this level, will target “the entire intonational structure of the music”.³⁵⁸ The fact that such experiments have as their object instrumental opposites circumscribed to the chamber genre (the choice of miniature musical genres proving otherwise the status of “stylistic experiments” attributed by the composers to these scores) proves to what extent the creative gesture evolved lucidly under the sign of the technical exercise. Among the pages written under the effect of the aesthetic-sound commands outlined above, there are also the few dedicated to the contrabass soloist.

The first Romanian composer to realize the soloist potential of the contrabass was the pianist and composer Filip Lazăr (1894-1936). Laureate of the “George

³⁵⁷ Stan Golestan, *Muzica 2*, nr. 8-9, mai-iunie 1909, p. 285

³⁵⁸ Clemansa Liliana Firca, *Direcții în muzica românească*, București, Editura Academiei, 1974, p. 12

Enescu” National Composition Prize (awarded since 1914), he was one of the accompanist partners of the virtuoso and founder of the Romanian contrabass school, Josef Prunner. The talented musician dedicated to him a musical piece entitled *Bagatelle*, a miniature edited in Paris in 1924. It is known as the first original score for contrabass and piano that appeared in Romanian musical creation and was successfully presented to the music-loving public by J. Prunner throughout his entire artistic activity.³⁵⁹

Of truly miniature dimensions - its duration, with all possible tempo variations, cannot exceed 1`50`` - the musical gem is particularly expressive. And this despite any claim of spectacular virtuosity of the text. For all its simplicity, instrumental playback is not as easy as it appears at first contact. The sketchy passing modulations must be discovered and highlighted, the sinuous harmonic path revealed, the dynamic dialogue between contrabass and piano (orchestra) finely differentiated. Moreover, its interpretation must reflect a total lack of preciousness, allowing that freedom of evolution of the melodic profiles specific to the popular melos, ethos uncontrived by the incessant changes of the metrical pulsation inside the sound discourse to be detected.

à Joseph Prunner.

BAGATELLE

pour Contrebasse ou Violoncelle et Piano

Aufführungsrecht vorbehalten.
Droits d'exécution réservés.

Filip Lazăr.
(1924)

Ex. 1: Filip Lazăr, *Bagatelle* for contrabass or cello and piano, measures 1-13, Paris, 1924, p. 3

Throughout the interpretation of the musical text - written in a traditional notation that does not exceed from a musical point of view the semiotic sphere specific to the romantic period – the exclusive use of conventional technical procedures is noted: the right hand – detachè, separato, legato, or hand left – articulation, vibrato. Of great importance for the successful rendering of the humorous and fresh content of the miniature is the need to highlight, by the performer, the ethos of the Romanian folk song and dance present in the middle part through the appearance of a well-known folk dance. Here, the performer can make small agogic oscillations not signaled by the composer, *meno mosso* at the beginning followed by *accelerando*, thus being able to highlight this dancing character.

³⁵⁹ It was presented to the public in a symphonic version under the baton of conductor George Georgescu in the concert of the Philharmonic Orchestra at the Romanian Athenaeum on November 20, 1927.

4. Conclusions

The beauty of European multiculturalism consists, among other essential characteristics related to different historical, economic, social or artistic-musical contexts, in the way in which each area, preserving its singularity (permanently related to tradition) has integrated into a system of similarities, trained in his turn in hard-to-predict developments. Thus, in the vast empire of musical creation, since the beginning of the 20th century, the creative conceptions of musicians seem to be dominated exclusively by the concern of approaching the functions of language elements, procedures, means of expression thought to be skillful rather than expressive-argumentative. Not the meaning but the unusual-innovative invention of the sound discourse tends to become the target of the imagination of modern composers so that the purpose, the artistic meaning gives way in favor of the exacerbation of the working method itself.

The talent, intelligence, genius of some of them led to the appearance of scores capable of facing time, successfully overcoming the ephemeral barriers of current stylistic models. Among them there are scores dedicated to the contrabass and the most representative ones in terms of musical content and interpretive approach will be the subject of brief analyzes and will constitute an important component of this research paper. The selection inherently carries a touch of subjectivity and appears to be necessary since the exhaustive presentation of the “creation for the contrabass in Romanian music from the 20th century to today” as it appears from the title of this book would far exceed the usual dimensions of such an initiative.

References

1. Brun, Paul, (2000), *A new history of Double Bass*, Paul Brun production
2. Cosma, Octavian Lazăr, (1976), *Hronicul muzicii românești*, vol. IV, *Romantismul*, București, Editura Muzicală
3. Firca, Clemansa Liliana, (1974), *Direcții în muzica românească*, București, Editura Academiei
4. Ghircoiașu, Romeo, (1963), *Contribuții la istoria muzicii românești*, vol. I, București, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor din R.P.R
5. Golestan, Stan, (1909), *Muzica 2*, nr. 8-9, mai-iunie
6. Hermann, Vasile, (1982), *Originile și dezvoltarea formelor muzicale*, Editura Muzicală, București
7. Sava, Iosif, Vartolomei, Luminița, (1997), *Mică enciclopedie muzicală*, Editura Aius, Craiova
8. Thomasz, Ștefan, (2005), *Repere timbrale ale literaturii secolului al XX-lea dedicate contrabasului în muzica românească*, Referat, UNMB
9. xxx, (2000), *Dicționar de mari muzicieni*, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București
10. xxx, (1986), *Mic dicționar enciclopedic*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică București
11. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Franz_Simandl, accessed on 26. 03. 2012