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Music, Poetry and Political Persecution: Wolf von Aichelburg

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“The Transylvanian poet and composer Wolf von Aichelburg explained to me at some point how important the place of birth is for humans. And that is because you see the sky differently from each and every place” (Andrei Pleșu, quoted in Pinter 2017). These thoughts, recently recalled by the Romanian writer and philosopher Andrei Pleșu, hint at the drama of captivity, which Aichelburg felt to the fullest during the last three of the almost six decades he spent in Romania (1922-1981).

Born in Croatia (in 1912), Aichelburg moved to Romania at the age of 10, as his family¹ settled in Sibiu/Hermannstadt, a medieval city in Transylvania, with a strong German minority population.² The cultural opportunities

¹ His father, a former Austrian marine officer, entered military service for the Romanian Army after the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

² Beginning with the 12th and the 13th centuries, the German minority was formed of distinct ethnic groups established in Transylvania and in the Banat (Transylvanian Saxons, Banat Swabians etc.). It has since played an indisputable role in the economic and cultural development of the area. However, during the 20th century, political changes profoundly affected the minority, which found itself more and more constrained. In the 1930 census, the ethnic German population in Romania counted 745,421 members. The fact that during the World War II, Romania was an ally of Nazi Germany until close to the end (August 23rd, 1944), when it switched sides to join the Allies, brought a number of consequences. Within the context of Romania joining the Soviet sphere of influence and the Communists coming to power, the persecution of

he experienced there, his philological studies in Cluj/Klausenburg, as well as his research stays in Germany and France (during the 1930s) facilitated Aichelburg's complex, encyclopaedic formation as a poet, essayist, translator and composer. Due to the fact that he was assimilated by the German minority in Romania, he became politically vulnerable after the World War II from the perspective of a hypothetical association with Nazism.

In the totalitarian climate that developed after 1945, Aichelburg, like many other people of German descent, received blow after blow. His employment as a translator for the Ministry of Propaganda during the war (1941-1944) turned him into a target. When he tried to flee the country in 1948, he received three years of imprisonment (1949-1951) and four more years of house arrest in a village in Moldavia (1952-1956).

After three years of apparent freedom, he was convicted once again in the so-called "trial of the German writers"³ – a political trial, handled in a Soviet manner. This time, Aichelburg was incriminated for his literary activity, which was deemed "reactionary": a volume of satirical tales featuring animals as characters, which problematizes the absence of liberty, *Die Ratten von Hameln* – a volume which was taken from the publisher and destroyed – as well as a "subversive" poem, which was not published, *Die rote Lüge*.

Following a humiliating trial (Petrescu 2016: 84-116) in which, among others, Aichelburg reached the point where he admitted to "not coming across as a friend of the regime in some of his letters . . . and to having proclaimed his *l'art pour l'art* position in some of his writings" (Petrescu 2016: 97), his sentence was given: "25 years of hard labour and 10 years of loss of rights for plotting by agitation against the social order" (Laza 2011: 222). He was forced to carry out three years of his sentence (between 1959 and 1962), and then two more years of house arrest, until 1964, when the communist government issued a general amnesty for political prisoners. In order to survive, according to the tales of Hans Bergel,⁴ a former detention and house arrest colleague of

ethnic Germans began. In 1945, many civilians of German descent (not to mention prisoners of war) were deported to the USSR to work camps. In 1948, there were officially only 343,913 ethnic Germans remaining. Starting with the end of the 1960s and up to 1989, almost 200,000 ethnic Germans left Romania due to a pact that was held secret for a long time: the communist state, ruled at the time by Nicolae Ceaușescu, was willing to sell them to the German Federal Republic, which paid for every immigrant (Cercel 2013; Deletant 2012: 441-442).

³ Four other German writers were convicted alongside Aichelburg: Andreas Birkner, Georg Scherg, Hans Bergel and Harald Siegmund.

⁴ Hans Bergel (b. 1925), German writer and journalist, born in Transylvania, Romania. Sentenced, just like Aichelburg, in the *Trial of the German Writers*, he

Aichelburg's, he was forced "to work as a janitor and also . . . as a scarecrow (!!)" in order to have anything to eat" (Irod 2012).

Rehabilitated in 1968, he began collaborating with magazines, publishing books and massively translating Romanian literature.⁵ The acknowledgement of his work was quick to appear: The Writers' Union prize for translation (1970) and the Order of Cultural Merit, second class (1972). Still, Aichelburg was soon targeted by the *Securitate* (secret police), which in 1974 recruited him as an informer, under the codename "Cațavencu" (Laza 2011: 226). The reason he signed such a commitment is not clear on his file (Laza 2011: 235), but neither is it difficult to guess. Article 200 of the Romanian communist Criminal Code⁶ criminalized homosexual encounters and was frequently used as an instrument of blackmail by the totalitarian regime. Although he was extremely discreet, Aichelburg was mentioned as a "pederast" in the files of the *Securitate* as early as 1964 (Laza 2011: 235, note 113). Moreover, the spying carried out by the *Securitate* in the summer of 1974 in the house of the literary critic Ion Negoïtescu ("Pleșiță" 2010), which to some extent targeted Aichelburg, might as well have been used in order to blackmail him and, eventually, to recruit him at the end of the same year. At any rate, now having to spy on his friends, Aichelburg proved unwilling to perform the assigned task, as one can glean from the files of the former *Securitate*.⁷ He was "no longer

managed to emigrate to Germany in 1968, where he successfully returned to writing. He was editor (1970-1989) of the München *Siebenbürgische Zeitung* publication; since 1991 he has been a co-editor of *Südostdeutsche Vierteljahresblätter* and he has also collaborated with *Bayerischer Rundfunk*.

⁵ He published in magazines such as *Transilvania*, *Echinoc*, and *Secolul 20*. He published his first volume of poetry at the age of 57: *Herbergen im Wind* (1969). Among his volumes of German translations, we can find: Vasile Voiculescu, *Magische Liebe* (1970); Vasile Voiculescu, *Das Traumrehlein* (1974); George Bacovia, *Versuri/Gedichte*, bilingual edition, with a preface by Ștefan Augustin Doinaș (1972); Mihai Eminescu, *Märchen* (1972); Mihai Eminescu, *Das Märchen vom Prinzen Tränenreich* (1975); Lucian Blaga, *Poeme/Gedichte*, bilingual edition, (1974); Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, *Cai în ploaie/Pferde im Regen*, bilingual edition (1974); Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, *Die Geschichte von den zehn Brüdern* (1979); Ion Pillat, *Gedichte* (1976); Radu Stanca, *Poezii/Gedichte*, bilingual edition, with a preface by Ștefan Augustin Doinaș (1979) etc. (all of them were published in Bucharest).

⁶ Article 200 of the 1968 Romanian Criminal Code (which was in effect until 1997) punished "sexual encounters between individuals of the same sex" with imprisonment from 1 to 5 years (*Codul penal* 1968).

⁷ "The fact that Aichelburg unmasked himself in front of one of the people that he was actually supposed to spy on [Hans Bergel] speaks about the quality of his collaboration with the *Securitate*." Also: "The file ends on May 15th, 1975 with a brief report which says that Aichelburg did not provide valuable operative information and that he is no longer used as an informer, without being asked to keep the past collaboration secret" (Laza 2011: 236).

used as an informer” after only a few months, thus losing the only advantage such collaboration could bring: the chance to travel abroad. After numerous attempts, he was able to obtain an emigration passport only in 1980, “following the personal efforts of the [German] chancellor” (Nausicaa Marbe, quoted in Gojowy 2007: 69-70), Helmut Schmidt.⁸

Aichelburg’s case is unusual not only because of the never-ending series of traumas that he endured, but also due to the unusual manner in which he reacted to all of it. His discretion, his elegance, his lack of resentment, his contagious desire to live, all of these were his mechanisms of defence, and they did not go unnoticed, both by those who knew him and by some scholars:

In an interview, Aichelburg confessed that for him, the secret of his survival is of a religious nature – however, he does not wish to talk about it. Moreover, it is discretion that kept him – unfortunately for posterity – from writing about his experience in detention and about his personal experience in general. He did not keep a journal either, so it is only his rich correspondence and the testimonies of those who met him that can recollect these acts of life. (Irod 2012)

The same serenity can also be inferred from the rough portrait sketched out by Nausicaa Marbe (quoted in Gojowy 2007: 69-70), the daughter of composer Myriam Marbe, a good friend of Aichelburg’s:

He was a total nonconformist, but always nice and polite, full of life, and his desire to live was enviable. He knew all about literature, painting, music but also about nature – he knew the Latin names of plants and insects. He had enjoyed a complete humanistic education, in the old style, and that was quite easy to observe. (Nausicaa Marbe, quoted in Gojowy 2007: 70)

Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran, with whom Aichelburg had a rich correspondence beginning with 1970, also expressed his amazement about the “serenity” with which Aichelburg got over so many difficult moments in his life in a letter dated February 25th, 1970 (Cioran 1995: 239). At the same

⁸ Helmut Schmidt (1918-2015) was the chancellor of the German Federal Republic between 1974 and 1982.

time, he appeared surprised with regard to the fact that Aichelburg showed an increased interest towards the field of composition. Cioran's perspective is very interesting: living in Paris, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, he could, nevertheless, understand Aichelburg's drive towards composition: "I did not know you were also a composer. Is it a calling or a recent quirk? The very fact that you hang onto *music* is what saves you". Cioran seemed to believe that Aichelburg's dedication to music was a form of "self-salvation", of liberation which, in the given political environment, would have been impossible through the written word. This hypothesis is also supported by a number of Aichelburg's poems, such as, for instance, the poem *Cuvânt și cuvânt* [Word and Word]: "Say not the words that / trouble you, trying to overcome / words born of prison that / then crumble as they come" (Aichelburg 1996). The same type of coded message can also be deciphered in the letter dated February 8th, 1971, in which Cioran writes: "You are right to fully dedicate yourself to music. As a matter of fact, we should only foster those fields where words are superfluous. Particularly in times like these. Music or geometry" (Cioran 1995: 244).

Though eclipsed by his success in the literary field, the musical side of Aichelburg's personality deserves, along with his other preoccupations, a closer look. Here are some of the coordinates of his complex relationship with music.

THE AMBIANCE OF BERLIN

The period of his musical studies is predominantly connected with the two years that he spent in Berlin, in 1935 and 1936. As Aichelburg noted: "I had to write drama, to learn to compose and to compose by myself a lot" (quoted in Mühlroth 2012). Berlin offered him the chance to join the elite of German music and even to bond with composers such as Paul Hindemith, Rudolf Wagner-Régenyi and Norbert von Hannenheim (Mühlroth 2012).

The fact that he met Hindemith, which took place after the latter had gone through the experience of late romanticism, expressionism and atonalism, most likely influenced his aesthetic-musical interest in neoclassicism. Aesthetic and musical language influences also came from Rudolf Wagner-Régenyi (Szaunig 2013), originally from Reghin, Transylvania, from whom Aichelburg "received numerous impulses for his composition" (Mühlroth 2012). An admirer of Ferruccio Busoni, Kurt Weill and Arnold Schoenberg, Wagner-Régenyi at the time set himself apart in his composition from the extremisms of modernism, as well as from the official Nazi direction.

The political context of Aichelburg's stay in Berlin was not exactly friendly. Musical life in Berlin had begun to feel the effects of Nazism: the official guidance of the compositional act, the condemnation of modernism under the guise that it was related to "degeneration", and the ever more powerful role of national-socialist propaganda. Both Hindemith and Wagner-Régenyi were affected by the political pressure of the Nazi regime. As his scores were displayed at the 1938 *Entartete Musik* exposition in Düsseldorf, Hindemith fled to Switzerland, and then to the US. In turn, Wagner-Régenyi drew Goebbels's ire with the work *Johanna Balk*, following its premiere in Vienna in 1941, and was sent to serve in the army in 1942 (Levi 2000: 157).

Neither of them however lived through a drama comparable to that of Norbert von Hannenheim, originally from Sibiu, one of Schoenberg's best students in Berlin (he studied with him in 1929-1931, Firca 2002: 239). In a discussion of his meeting with von Hannenheim in the autumn of 1936, Aichelburg highlighted the effects of Nazism on his music and especially on his discourse on music:

Hannenheim could engage in very interesting discussions on a host of things, but when it came to music, nothing serious could come out of him. He would descend into paradoxes and sarcasm, turning into the pin cushion that he kept embodying ever since his music became suppressed in catacombs, as being extremely degenerate. . . . Once, in an exchange of criss-cross questions, he explained: "I am a discoverer. I have found the exact musical equivalent of the insipidity of the all-ruling tyranny, the formula that gives expression to the whole that is represented by totalitarianism: a band with as many trumpets as possible . . . flourishing in C major". There is probably not even one single chord in C major in Hannenheim's oeuvre. This was his personal contribution to the resistance. (Aichelburg, quoted in Gerhard S. von Hannenheim 2015)

The trauma suffered by this composer from Sibiu – confined for a period of time for mental problems in Meseritz-Obrawalde, where he also died in 1945 – highlights a different facet of totalitarianism than the one Aichelburg were to later experience in Romania. Hannenheim's recollections undoubtedly troubled Aichelburg for a long time, as one can see in the articles in which he invoked him during the 1970s (Aichelburg 1971: 3; 1974: 4).

AICHELBURG AND THE MEMBERS OF THE SIBIU LITERARY CIRCLE

In art, Aichelburg embraced the ideal of classicism, which brought him close to the “euphorianist”⁹ way of thinking popularised by an influential literary Circle in Sibiu. With some of the members of the Circle (Ion Negoïtescu, Cornel Regman, Radu Stanca, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș) he became good friends, after 1944. Among their other affinities, a passion for music was undoubtedly a common denominator in their relationship. The exchange of letters between Aichelburg and Negoïtescu or between Negoïtescu and Stanca¹⁰ reflects their clear preference for a modern, 20th century repertoire, expressed in comments that are “not only pertinent, but also subtle”, “of connoisseurs” (Sandu-Dediu 2014: 51). Moreover, the opinion shared by Aichelburg with Negoïtescu in a letter dated May 25th, 1956, clearly shows his critical attitude towards the conventionalism of socialist realism, towards the forced mixing of art with “the socialist system”:

You write that the concert programs in Bucharest are deplorable. From what I conclude from the programs published by the press, I think you are perfectly right. (Not long ago however, there was a Bartók concert; too bad I could not attend it.) I have listened to the famous Khachaturian Violin Concerto. I don't want to fill up another page, but it's “become clear” now. Others have bled for decades, have fought, sacrificing for a new, authentic expression, have conquered a new field – and now some dexterous merchants and mediators of values come along to sweeten up the asperities of the previous conquerors for the public and to make them – the public – believe that all of this has grown on their piles of garbage, and even worse: they harness their own authentic gift of expressivity to exchange it for the cheap coin of accepted values, of conventions. It transforms expression into convention, in the same way in which “expression” is always accepted, when it does not constrain to anything etc. . . . It is in vain: art is one thing, and social order is another. Both may be good, but they only have seeming points of contact. (Aichelburg, quoted in Cazimir 2014)

⁹ It is interesting to see in Euphorion – their chosen symbol (and the name of the Circle's magazine) – Goethe's character, the son of Helen and Faust, who “reunites Greek, Apollonian spirit and modern Faustian hubris” (Irod 2012).

¹⁰ With regard to the correspondence between Negoïtescu and Stanca (1945-1960), see Sandu-Dediu 2014: 50-58.

AICHELBURG'S MUSICAL THOUGHT

Moving slightly ahead of his friends in the Circle, Aichelburg published in 1975-1976 a series of essays on music in the *Transilvania* magazine. Unblemished by official ideology and diverse in terms of theme (from ancient music to jazz, *musique concrète*, mathematics and music etc.),¹¹ the essays reflect a coherent and consistent way of thinking about the sonorous phenomenon.

The prejudice-free perspective that he outlines when writing about the origin of music and about ancient music (Aichelburg 2010a: 273-274; 2010b: 278-280) places itself against the general trend of approaching the subject at the time – in Romania, at least. Through a convincing demonstration, it shows the impossibility of truly arriving at a description of ancient music, although the handbooks and university courses of the period were endeavouring to reach one:

Instead of talking about music, a sonorous phenomenon, we talk about the ancient Egyptians in terms of religious stories, and when discuss the Greeks we pause at some complicated and frankly boring theories. Mere facts regarding the history of culture and religion. Where then is the music? The testimonies themselves have been lost. (Aichelburg 2010b: 278)

His modern thinking, in the spirit of the time, allows us to infer – in several of his essays – the author's indebtedness to ideas present in structuralism, musical semiotics, and the mathematical modelling of the art of sounds, which were popular in the 1960s-1970s. As such, music is defined, for instance, as a language, as a convention:

And still, music has something to say. . . . Music is an orderly system, similar to spoken words: a combination of signs that follow grammatical rules. Music has its grammar. (Aichelburg 2010c: 282)

With arguments from the field of semiotics, Aichelburg confronts the pre-conception that music could be “a universal language”; in his opinion, music is not and cannot be a universal language so long as it is based on culturally accepted significations:

¹¹ A total of 13 essays published in the *Transilvania* magazine (1975, nos. 1-4, 6-12; 1976, nos. 1, 4) have been republished in Aichelburg 2010.

In music, the sensorial concreteness is most important. In language, it is signification. But we do have signification in music, at every step, and it needs to be learned and assimilated. Assimilating meaning is also done step by step, based on the rhythm of the repetitions and of the experiences, in a manner similar to how a language is learned. The material of musical speech is relatively similar. The meaning, the expression, however, are different. . . . Music is, therefore, a language only apparently *universal*. (Aichelburg 2010d: 308-309; emphasis in original)

Aichelburg is also interested in the relationship between music and mathematics, music and computers, which were in full ascension during that period, but he intuits, at the same time, the limits of the mathematical modelling of music:

At a certain point one might get the impression that all music is nothing more than a camouflaged labyrinth of mathematical formulas, in which the mathematician should merely look for the hidden entrance, the key, in order to enter it and to prove that it is mathematical in origin (Aichelburg 2010e: 299).

He finds such clarifications even more necessary “in our age of computers, when preoccupations in speculative mathematics among the musicians have become here and there a full-fledged epidemic” (Aichelburg 2010e: 299).

There are also other subjects that he approaches with integrity, proving his musical knowledge and his solid reading: “What is a Symphony?” (Aichelburg 2010f: 287-289), “Musicality in Poetry” (Aichelburg 2010g: 302-304), or “Musique Concrète” (Aichelburg 2010h: 305-307). He also shows that he is open to the ethnomusicologic approach when it comes to tackling “The Problem of Jazz” (Aichelburg 2010i: 297-298), but becomes truly circumspect when it comes to aesthetic categories in music – as he is in his article “The Comic Aspect of Music” (Aichelburg 2010j: 290-292). What is interesting in terms of a complex artist such as Aichelburg is the opposition that he manifests towards what he calls “The Danger of Literaturisation in Music” (Aichelburg 2010k: 293-296). The barbed criticism towards George Bălan’s book *Music and the World of Ideas* (1973) – a very popular author in Bucharest during the period, whose name he avoids mentioning – is eloquent:

Our author even accuses Mozart of having seductively introduced that monster Don Giovanni. It would have been a pity if he hadn't! A didactic composition might have been created otherwise, of pietist, petit bourgeois taste – which has long since been outgrown by any kind of emancipated morality – and not a work of art among the most perfect ever imagined, with an aesthetic radiance that shines through the ages. (Aichelburg 2010k: 295)

Aichelburg's belief here is that:

Music does not have to be mistaken for literature or philosophy. We might agree with many of the moral attitudes of the author, but “our musical morality” rises against the author trying to mix oil and water. Not even the description given to music in general, as “an art of love” cannot convince us. Why is it music and not poetry? Such claims, as daring as they are vague, always engender scepticism. (Aichelburg 2010k: 296)

AICHELBURG, THE COMPOSER

Around the time he wrote these essays, in 1976, Aichelburg received the *Johann-Wenzel-Stamitz-Preis*, East Germany's music award for composition. Even though it was the most important recognition of his career as a composer, he could not attend the award ceremony. After having proven his “lack of seriousness” in his collaboration with the *Securitate*, Aichelburg never received a passport to attend the event. The *Laudatio* written, on the (missed) occasion of the initial performance, by the composer and theoretician Heinrich Simbriger, published in the same year in *Südostdeutsche Vierteljahresblätter* (Simbriger 1976: 277-278) represents an important indicator of the way in which his music was received in 1970s Germany.

Though interested in the phenomenon of modernity, in his compositions Aichelburg never asserted himself as being avant-garde or an experimentalist. The key to understanding his compositional style was laconically offered by Aichelburg himself: “I would truly enjoy composing in the same manner as Alban Berg, but what comes out of my hand is rather Ravel-esque” (Aichelburg, quoted in Simbriger 1976: 277). Aside from the subtle self-irony and Aichelburg's objective stance towards his own work, Simbriger identifies here two main stylistic axes: the first is the relationship with the dodecaphonic principle, which for Aichelburg did not take “the shape of the orthodox serial

technique of Schoenberg”, but rather materialized in a sort of complementary harmony, and the second is the influence of neoclassicism, which – Simbriger concludes – “he surely received from Stravinsky and Bartók” (Simbriger 1976: 277-278).

The works composed until 1976 show Aichelburg’s clear preference for the genres of the concerto and of chamber music: four soloist concertos (two for the piano, one for the violin, one for the trumpet), nine string quartets, two trios (one for piano, the other for woodwind instruments), two sonatas for flute solo and for violin solo, five piano sonatas and a large number of lieder. The poetic texts he employed in his vocal miniatures (Goethe, Brecht, old German poetry, feminine lyrics from Transylvania, as well as the work of François Villon) shape a diverse and nuanced sonorous world, in which both “seriousness and merriment meet each other, worship and irony, . . . affinity for the homeland and for the past” (Simbriger 1976: 278).

Simbriger pays a lot of attention to an ample work for soloists, choir and orchestra, *Canticum Simeonis: Nunc dimittis servum tuum*. Reflecting upon Aichelburg’s difficult life, Simbriger reads the song of aged Simeon, “Herr, nun lässest Du Deiner Diener in Frieden sterben, denn meine Augen haben den Erlöser gesehen” . . ., in an autobiographical key. Recalling this *opus* is thus, at the same time, a means of ending the *Laudatio* on an optimistic note:

We hope that this *Canticum Simeonis* may indicate not only the ending of a period in life, but at the same time the beginning – from a musical point of view – of the Coda of a life that, as we know from Beethoven, need not only be a final conclusion, but can still bring ample and important development. We hope that this development also comes in the life and work of our colleague Aichelburg (Simbriger 1976: 278).

It is surprising that, in spite of his prolific oeuvre and of the international recognition garnered by the Stamitz Prize, Aichelburg has remained a relatively unknown composer in Romania. His music has never been played on the important stages of country, nor has it been published here.¹² The fact that the Viola and Piano Sonata (1992) was recently included in the most important contemporary music festival in Bucharest, the International Week of New Music (2016) – and later performed by Marius Ungureanu (viola) and

¹² Aichelburg’s scores started to be published after 1990, in Germany, by publishers such as Tonger Musikverlag or Astoria Verlag.

Verona Maier (piano) in Sibiu, as well as in Baden, Switzerland – represents a first step towards a necessary recovery of his music. Further musicological investigation, in terms of the trauma suffered by Aichelburg in communist Romania, as well as comparisons with his contemporaries will undoubtedly bring his music greater visibility and, eventually, its reappraisal.

English version by Dragoş Manea

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