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Laudatio for Professor
Richard Taruskin

Festive Meeting of the National University of Music Senate.
Bucharest, October 19th, 2018

I discovered Richard Taruskin's work some 15 years ago, when, interested in theories of musical performance, I was trying to understand a phenomenon which at that time was quasi-unknown to Romanian musicians: "historical performance practice". In his capacity as both theoretician and choir conductor, Richard Taruskin opens the discussion on historical performance by referring to his own experience (Taruskin 1982). Someone reproachfully contented that the renditions of his ensemble, Cappella Nova, are too subjective, too arbitrary, and that he should "let music speak for itself". Would it then mean that the performer is just a mediator (a necessary evil) which some composers would gladly dispose of and, if possible, even replace with electronic tools? It could also be argued that one should "let the composer speak for themselves", but it is virtually impossible to know, to discern the composer's intentions. What does, after all, authenticity in performance mean, what does respecting the composer's wish mean? By way of answer, Taruskin quotes Verdi's ironic phrase on verismo: "It's fine to reproduce reality, but how much better to create it" (Taruskin 1982: 108).

Research alone cannot offer sufficient information to attain this authenticity. The performer who, attempting to reconstruct a music of the past, will not go further than the scientific standards of his research can for sure obtain a correct result, but not one necessarily related to the real musical contents. The most convincing and also the most controversial such reconstructions were born of a style endowed with a lot of imagination:

And what seems to prove my point is that with the possible exception of the rather ambiguous case of *continuo* realization, the modern reconstructionist movement has produced many scrupulous realizers of musical notation but has yet to produce a single genuine master of improvisation, which we all know to have been nine-tenths of the Renaissance and Baroque musical icebergs. (Taruskin 1982: 114)



Fig. 1. *Valentina Sandu-Dediu gives the laudatio for Richard Taruskin.*
Photo: Sorin Antonescu.

Taruskin again discusses the principles of historically aware, or historically informed, performance in other essays, published and republished in the 1980s and the 1990s (Taruskin 1995). The main themes stay the same. That authenticity insisted upon by performers specializing in early music cannot be reached only by reconstructing the outer conditions of the “native performance”, because this don’t automatically mean a reconstruction of the composer’s subjectivity. The differences between performers and academic musicologists stem from the same quest for authenticity, the two using distinct tools, and musicology taking its share of the blame in making mistakes. For example, the assertion that that performance is ideal, which is faithful to the composer’s original intentions, is unsettled by the impossibility of know-

ing exactly what those intentions are. At the end of the day, appealing to the composer's intentions means "an evasion of the performer's obligation to understand what he is performing" (Taruskin 1995: 98). Once disseminated, the score becomes the performer's responsibility. The problems with "historical" performance begin with Taruskin's belief that the quest for "authenticity" is a modern attitude.

I hold that "historical" performance today is not really historical; that a specious veneer of historicism clothes a performance style that is completely of our time, and is in fact the most modern style around; and that the historical hardware has won its wide acceptance and above all its commercial viability precisely by virtue of its novelty, not its antiquity. (Taruskin 1995: 102)

I have insisted on our guest of honour's ideas because I owe him the discovery of another tone in musicology than the one I was used to. Barely alive after communism had suffocated it with its ideology, Romanian musicology was unfamiliar with such concepts as challenge, polemics, dispute. As I was collecting more and more of Richard Taruskin's writings, from his authoritative essays on Russian music to the impressive six-volume history of music, I was discovering a spirit eager for knowledge, hardly easy, never willing to accept what others have said without asking (himself) questions. The very revisiting of the beaten track of writing a history of Western music is the achievement of an original thinking. One could often distance oneself from Richard Taruskin's ideas: many musicologists have done so, entering into violent arguments. But he will be most delighted, taking up the gauntlet and turning flamboyant in his passionate or caustic replies.

*

Multiple and various internet addresses give information on Richard Taruskin's profile (McBride 2008, Service 2009, Kosman 2014). Born in 1945 in New York, he studied Russian and musicology at Columbia University, where he would later teach until 1986, when he accepted a post of professor at University of California, Berkley. We must nevertheless add a touch of colour to such markers by adding some significant detail. Growing up in a home where music also had a permanent home, his mother being a piano teacher and his father an amateur violinist, Richard Taruskin first studied cello, then turned to viol and played regularly with New York's Aulos Ensemble.

At Columbia University he conducted the Collegium Musicum (1968-1973), then the Cappella Nova (1975-1983). If such experiences drove him to a theoretical reflection on musical performance (in his articles in *The New York Times* from the 1980s), something else he inherited from his family – the fact that his grandparents were immigrant Jews from territories now belonging to the Ukraine – got him interested in Russian music. He wrote his master's thesis on Stasov, then, at the beginning of the 1970s, he received a Fulbright grant to work in Moscow on his PhD thesis, which he would publish in 1981: *Opera and Drama in Russia as Preached and Practiced in the 1860s*. The essays on Mussorgsky and the two extensive volumes on Stravinsky (*Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra*, 1996) continue the investigations on Russian music in a complex context: intellectual, artistic, cultural, social, linguistic. In fact he still carefully observes this area today, and I am not referring just to his 2008 book *On Russian Music*, but also to the conference we are privileged to hear this afternoon at the New Europe College, on Prokofiev: an original perspective on how music interacts with political and social history.

I will not launch, today, into an analysis of our guest of honour's writings. But I do respectfully draw your attention to the intellectual level and the brilliant style in writing an accessible musicology for the wider public, be it in newspaper articles (published in *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, and others) or in the essays collected in his volume *The Danger of Music: And Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (2009). Besides, in a recent dialogue with Laura Tunbridge, Richard Taruskin says: "I used to preach to my pupils till I'm sure I exasperated them that nothing is easier than to be difficult or more difficult than to be easy. Achieving that easiness is what makes you a real writer" (Taruskin and Tunbridge 2018: 8).

I don't need to prompt my colleagues and students to go into a bookshop or a library to browse one of the six volume of the *Oxford History of Western Music*, published in 2005, because we are already familiar with this work. But it must be said that the overwhelming influence that Richard Taruskin has in the North-American or European academic communities from North America, Europe and elsewhere is due on the one hand to the impressive capacity to synthesize in some 4000 pages the history of music from Gregorian chant to the millennium change we ourselves witnessed, on the other hand to his ability to comment on it by exhibiting a personal critical lens, an unmistakable tone, and a readiness for polemic.

For this monumental contribution, Richard Taruskin was awarded in 2017 the Kyoto Prize, one of the most prestigious and substantial distinc-

tions which had until then been reserved for composers or conductors only (Messiaen, Cage, Lutosławski, Boulez, Xenakis, Ligeti, Harnoncourt). We join those who pay him homage, of course in the timid, unostentatious tonality characteristic to the academic community, and we thank him for having accepted the title of Doctor Honoris Causa of the National University of Music Bucharest on the occasion of his first visit to Romania. We also wish that this visit be followed by others, and that it stimulate his curiosity for our lesser-known music.

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English version by Maria Monica Bojin

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