

Musicology Today

Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest

Issue 3 (35) July-September 2018

Title: Musics of the Power, Powers of the Music

Author: Vlad Văidean

E-mail: vladvaidean@yahoo.com

Source: Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest / Volume 9 / Issue 3 (35) / July-September 2018, pp 271-280

Link to this article: musicologytoday.ro/35/MT35thoughtsVaidean.pdf

How to cite this article: Vlad Văidean, "Musics of the Power, Powers of the Music", *Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest*, 9/3 (35) (2018), 271-280.

Published by: Editura Universității Naționale de Muzică București

Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest is indexed by EBSCO, RILM, and ERIH PLUS

Vlad VĂIDEAN
National University of Music Bucharest

Musics of the Power, Powers of the Music*

“We, who live in music, have no place in politics and must regard it as foreign to our being. We are a-political, at best able to aspire to remain silently in the background.”¹

It was of course Arnold Schoenberg, that is, the one responsible in great measure for the progressive fanaticism of modernist aesthetic agenda, who said it in so many words. The peremptory position they express and the incisive radicality of the tone they assume in fact point to the ideal which set into motion, for a period of almost two centuries, the tradition of Western art music: the belief that music can and must be an auto-sufficient language, whose meaning is to be found in its own substance only, and which therefore can and must be kept as far as possible from the everyday matters. The romantics articulated and imposed this belief, as a conjunction of the concept of aesthetic autonomy (of “art for art’s sake”) and the perennial impulse to transcend the world of human imperfection and error. That explains why, for mentalities showing the imprint of romantic vision, the arts in general became secular surrogates of religious aspiration and philosophical contemplation. Music in particular has been put on a pedestal which not only placed it in opposition to this world, but presented it as a revelation, as not belonging to it. The very fact that it makes it possible for thought and feeling to meet on common ground, where they can move free from all referential, discursive or conceptual contents; its very abstract nature constituted the main

* This paper was previously published in Romanian as Văidean 2018.

¹ Arnold Schoenberg, letter to Josef Rufer, May 23th, 1948, quoted in Betz 1982: 44.

argument for isolating music in a sort of a metaphysical “quarantine”: seeing that the world only seems capable of getting worse, those who make and theorise music felt all the more justified in keeping their hands clean, in withstanding ideological contracts, in remaining outside and above the mundane.

Discourse on music was for a long time normed by such reading in a “purist” or “formalist” key. All that is essential and significant in this art was explained by an exclusive appeal to intrinsically musical factors, and the anxieties and ideological paranoia during the Cold War only encouraged academic musicians’ tendency to retire in their own technical laboratory. It was as recently as the last few decades that the insufficiency, and even the falsity, of an analysis relying strictly on the form and contents of the musical work became evident. For, in the absence of an equally detailed investigation of the whole sum of social and institutional limitations man was subjected to, not only an essential dimension of the musical phenomena is lost, but precisely that all-encompassing semantic web once detected by Max Weber,² that matrix of symbols, more or less obscured, which eventually makes the valorisation of any human activity possible and comprehensible. This is why examining the degree to which producing and disseminating musical works depend on extra-musical contexts and subtexts is also an insight into the degree to which even pieces which assume that apolitical positioning proclaimed by Schoenberg can be understood as nevertheless having an inevitable symbolic and ideological reason or side to them. After all, even the so-called “absolute” music can take a host of interpretations and manipulations difficult to control, because its abstract, semantically imprecise character collects and attracts, magnet-like, functions and meanings which sometimes come to elude or contradict the composer’s intentions, so often invoked. This happens because music remains first and foremost a social activity, always guided by a certain functional orientation, be it overt or camouflaged under the so commanding mask of aesthetic detachment. Its value and relevance remain possible not in that autotelic isolation romantics dreamed of, but only in relation to the social order it is free to reflect, support, or challenge. In the end, if it really had no contact at all with the so ordinary reality, music wouldn’t even have had the overwhelming importance we can discern from its ubiquity and its capacity to mould to any individual’s and any social group’s keys for managing ideas or emotions. And, in fact, music not only passively adapts to the various motivations of those making it and listening to it, it also has the power to influence

² “Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs” (Geertz 1973: 5).

emotions and behaviours, to support and render manifest identity patterns, to bring together or separate the members of a group thus bound. It is both an occasion for introspection, for reconciling with the frailty and uniqueness of one's own self, and an enzyme catalysing the gregarious instinct, able to consolidate, or, when political conflict demands it, ignite national pride.

This extraordinary power that music has to shape spirit and body, to bind individual affective edifices and collective common values thus has a multiple, even chameleonic, nature. Using and abusing it are equally possible, which explains, among others, the impulse that certain thinkers have always had, to ethically regulate the way it functions. This tendency is manifest even from Plato and Aristotle, who considered music's beneficial or detrimental effects on us so socially relevant, that they found it proper to discuss them in their political writings, and not in those dedicated to the arts in general.³ But more significant is the fact that most political leaders craving for absolute power were constantly concerned with turning music into a slave of ideology. Unlike democratic regimes, in which power is distributed on the various levels of the society and, as a consequence, each social group is recognized the right to musically form and proclaim its own identity, when a single individual or a single party monopolises power, music, as all other activity for that matter, will be standardized and watched. A democratic mentality is used to tolerating all types of music, including those it dislikes, by virtue of the fact that it considers them rather a matter of taste, of an "innocent luxury", as Charles Burney famously put it.⁴ Instead, a totalitarian mentality takes music very seriously, too seriously: it may very well see it as a luxury, but by no means as an innocent one. Besides, probably the only somewhat positive aspect that a music fan could grant dictators is precisely this – that they acutely, profoundly felt the danger of not taking music's powers into account. They knew they were dealing with a sort of a Pandora's box, so they tried to put the lid back on, or rather to confiscate it for their own personal interest. For totalitarian regimes and musics did connect, albeit in a distorted manner whose norm was an artificial enthusiasm all the more vigorously simulated as those taking part in that effervescence let themselves prey to the paralysing hypnosis of terror or the prickly bitterness of opportunism.

I would say it's quite difficult to define the relationship between music – commonly perceived as allowing the greatest freedom of speech and sub-

³ See Plato's dialogues *The Republic* and *The Laws*, and Aristotle's *Politics*.

⁴ "Music is an innocent luxury, unnecessary indeed, to our existence, but a great improvement and gratification of the sense of hearing" (Burney 1935: 31).

sequently allowing the individual to thrive – and this supreme mockery of human integrity by totalitarian collectivism. Nothing more than a cursory reflection on this subject will almost inevitably invite to empathic engagement and will trigger the ethic grid, so that analysing it with the tools of academic objectivity encounters quite some traps. Maybe it's also because of this, in addition to the evident socio-political reasons, that the Eastern European countries of the former communist bloc experienced later that recalibration of the musicological discourse which Western European or American researchers had known as early as the beginnings of the 1980s; it is that so-called “new musicology” which, under the conjugated pressure of democratic pluralism and the boom of such disciplines as ethnomusicology and cultural studies, felt the need to take the music of Western civilisation down its romantic pedestal, to present it just as any other type of music or cultural artefact, calling into play a growing attention for “unmasking” the ideological mechanisms which formed the basis for its configuration in social, political and general-cultural contexts. Investigating the devastating impact of totalitarian regimes could only have an increasingly important place in such an array of interests, which sooner or later musicologists from Eastern Europe had to join, precisely by virtue of their rich “experience” therein.

It's become common among Romanian musicologists too, this more and more pronounced interest in clarifying and at the same time problematizing the inevitably vitiated intersections between music and the “dark times” it had to go through, as did the whole Romanian society, over the last century. *Music in Dark Times: Europe East and West, 1930-1950* was in fact the title of the first large Romanian dedicated project, comprising lectures and debates and hosted in the autumn of 2014 by New Europe College Bucharest (NEC).⁵ And it was also the title of the subsequent volume, published by the National University of Music Bucharest (UNMB) and edited by Valentina Sandu-Dediu, which contains, in addition to studies by other Romanian authors (Nicolae Gheorghîță, Costin Moisil, and Florinela Popa), papers by illustrious foreign participants (Hermann Danuser, Helmut Loos, Annegret Fauser, Melita Milin, Luba Kyyanovska, and Anna G. Piotrowska).⁶ A follow-up endeavour, *The Musics of Power: Music and Musicians in Totalitarian Regimes in 20th Century Europe*, took place in the second half of 2018, when the UNMB Doctoral

⁵ See <http://www.nec.ro/data/pdfs/public-events/2014/oct/Program-Symposium-Music-in-dark-times.pdf>, accessed on February 8th, 2019.

⁶ See Sandu-Dediu 2016 and *Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest*, vol. 7, issues 3 (27) and 4 (28).

School under the coordination of Nicolae Gheorghită ran musicology conferences, edited lesser-known Romanian scores, and organised a Romanian contemporary music recital. The main event of this very generous project was the international symposium of October 18-19th, 2018, held at NEC and UNMB.⁷

I noticed again, as I had done in 2014, the constant trouble the Romanian musicologists take to reevaluate, from as disinhibited and critical a perspective as possible, Romanian history of music in the last century. Definitely an ambitious program, especially as at each step one must make the effort to erase the scoria of all communist-rooted ideological clichés which guided (and which, more or less subadjacently, still guide) Romanian musicological discourse. A daring program, too, as most of the papers focused on a difficult – perhaps the most difficult – period, consequently too little investigated, if not deliberately avoided until now by Romanian musicology: the decade 1938-1948, when far-right dictatorial rules (of King Carol II, of the National Legionary State, and of Marshal Ion Antonescu) followed one another brutally and at a dizzying speed, and then the first post-war decade (the “obsessive decade”),⁸ when in Romania the communist regime inspired by the most abusive Stalinist model took power. By focusing on this twisted temporal interval, the researchers approached the local musical phenomenon from various angles.

They highlighted for instance the way ideological censorship intervened in music genres other than academic. Valentina Sandu-Dediu presented the special case of operetta, which in the 1950s became a real tool of propaganda: although it remained between the limits of the established Viennese recipe, and even adopted some American jazz influences, it was now the duty of this

⁷ See http://www.nec.ro/data/pdfs/public-events/2018/october/2018-10-18_PROGRAM_SIMPOZION.pdf, accessed on February 8th, 2019.

⁸ This memorable expression (Romanian: *obsedantul deceniu*) was first used by the most popular Romanian writer from the post war period, in one of his articles in the series *A Question a Week with Marin Preda*, initiated in 1970 (see Preda 1970). It then entered the literary critics' vocabulary to denote the enduring fashion of the so-called “denunciation novels”, heavily politically-oriented, of the “righter of wrongs” type, in which the atrocities and horrors of the 1950s were denounced as well as the fanatic, “obsessive” hurry to introduce in the Romanian society the communist principles whose propriety those novels didn't even stop to question. Sanctioned in the 1960s and persisting until the end of the 1980s, this direction taken by the combative proses was in fact tolerated and encouraged by the national communism under Ceaușescu: by seemingly promoting freedom of speech, aimed at consolidating its legitimacy by the contrast with the Stalinist shortcomings. Not counting its validation by the literary history debates, the “obsessive decade” concept came to circulate in the histories of virtually all artistic domains and in historians' general discourse as a fitting tag for the first phase of Romanian communism.

form of entertainment to contribute to the “building of socialism”, first by approaching subjects meant not only to amuse but also to paint in invariably optimistic colours the new social realities, and then by overtly turning to folk music for inspiration, thereby supporting the hyperbolic proclamation of a much-desired “national character”. As Sandu-Dediu pointed out, mythologizing Ciprian Porumbescu’s romantic figure is perhaps one of the most enduring consequences, much facilitated by Gherase Dendrino’s still popular operetta *Let Me Sing*. In his turn, Alex Vasiliu commented on the problematic position that jazz had during the communist regime, giving less known facts on the open conflict with the political authorities in which Richard Oschanitzky and Eugen Ciceu had entered in their formative years.

Other papers bet on the singular results of archive research. Antigona Rădulescu thus extracted from a source previously not inspected, the Human Resources Archives of the UNMB, various reports, testimonies and slanderous denunciations, most of them dating from the first years of communist rule in Romania, as well as some others, fewer but proving just as instructive, from the earlier far-right dictatorial rules. As preposterous and almost unreal as they now seem because of the shallow, limited but virulent wooden language they operate with, such documents remain particularly relevant for the grave consequences moral laxity can have on the social level. Again by looking into some (of the very few still extant) archive materials did Nicolae Gheorghiuță review the numerous activities (choral performances, albums, films, conferences, exhibitions, solemn festivities, proletarian competitions) by means of which the Romanian People’s Republic, along with all living beings under Soviet control, paid homage, in the year of grace 1949, to Joseph Stalin’s 70th birthday. Discussed in parallel with the severe changes in the musical world, which occurred in the same year both institutionally (the reconfiguration of the Society of Romanian Composers after the Soviet model of creative unions) and ideologically (the imposition of socialist realism as the only acceptable aesthetic dogma), that true “collective psychosis” presented to the “brilliantissimo Generalissimo”⁹ might seem, especially to a younger public, as taken from a far-away, primitive, if not downright implausible reality. All the more reason to consider its documentation quite necessary, precisely to ease the awareness of the fact that because such horrors did happen, and at such obscene proportions, they can always threaten to come back. Of course, the rebirth of a totalitarian empire on the basis of fanatic nationalism no longer seems credible,

⁹ Romanian: *genialissimul Generalissim*, Vladimir Tismăneanu’s and Marius Stan’s expression from the title of their essay (see Tismăneanu and Stan 2015).

and the political or ethnic justification of physical extermination will hopefully remain in a definite past. Yet some remains of the mentalities upon which such abominable actions were founded still pulsate, radioactive; and they will continue to do so as long humans are humans, especially because it would only probably take a major crisis (food, water, or fuel) for the herd instinct – nothing more than the waiting room of any totalitarian regime – to come out again. Historical consciousness must therefore remain permanently alert and awake.

To resume, I appreciated as just as instructive the perspectives adopted by two authors who related critically to certain aspects, ideologically distorted, of Romanian writing on music. Costin Moisil thus proposed a general reevaluation of Romanian Byzantine studies. What he did was to show the decisive degree to which nationalism, promoted as official state ideology, represent the determining factor able to explain the privileged, apparently paradoxical, standing of local religious music research during a fundamentally atheist regime. Florinela Popa then talked about the quite various ways Romanian musical press reflected the reception of Sergei Prokofiev's music. Obviously, as they were talking about a lead of Soviet musical culture, the way he was discussed depended essentially on the position that the political power in Bucharest adopted towards Moscow. Inquiring into journalistic texts from the period between the 1930s and the first post-communist decade, written by music critics (Miron Grindea, Alfred Hoffman), composers (Zeno Vancea, Serghiu Sarchizov), or historiographers (Ovidiu Varga, Octavian Lazăr Cosma), the author had the occasion to distinguish between several types of reception. Charming because of their colourful linguistic clichés proved to be the articles dating from the inter-war period in particular, fascinated by the "exotic" ambassador of "Bolshevik music", but also those written immediately after the composer's death, and which tried above all to prove their Proletkultist élan, that is, to denigrate the "formalist" influences in the works Prokofiev composed during his Western years (1918-1932).

Other papers focused on the music and the key moments in the biographies of several Romanian composers who had the strength to resist political pressure and manipulation. Laura Vasiliu outlined Pascal Bentoiu's powerful moral profile and artistic excellence: in the darkest years of Romanian communism, the young composer managed to avoid any compromise and to carve out a career for himself as a free-lance musician (for the unfavourable personnel file didn't allow him to complete his music studies, nor to find a job as a university teacher like his contemporaries), having the benefit of the constant admiration and inconspicuous support of Ion Dumitrescu, the influent and efficient president of the Union of Romanian Composers and Musicologists. More analytical were the

studies presented by the two musicologists from Cluj-Napoca, Gabriel Banciu and Oana Andreica. The former researched some controversial works, for a long time regarded with suspicion by the communist authorities, but also several “desk drawer” works by the one who remains the patriarch of Cluj-Napoca’s composition and musicology, Sigismund Toduță. Oana Andreica highlighted, by means of a very detailed analysis of the piece *Finit coronat opus*, an important inflection point in avant-garde composer Costin Miereanu’s career. Besides ample references to the extremely particular musical style proper of the work in question, Andreica also pointed out that its being awarded in 1967 the European Cultural Foundation Prize didn’t necessarily make things easier for the composer: in the context of the Romanian musical landscape of the time, Miereanu had already acquired the reputation of a “bad boy”, to use Andreica’s term, that is, he had collided with the political authorities (what later determined him to settle in France).

I now realize I am still somewhat in the shadow of the old “tension-between-national-and-universal” thinking pattern, as my account left for the end exactly the contribution of the foreign participants in the symposium. I want to state that I only did this because it was the most convenient approach, and not because I had the wish to signal some graded order. For, although I was completely unfamiliar with the subjects they advanced, I did find myself just as captivated: Patrick Zuk (Durham University) engaged in a painstaking research of the numerous and very cordial letters two lesser-known Soviet composers, Nikolai Myaskovsky and Maximilian Steinberg, exchanged, which led him to a series of pertinent conclusions on the Soviet musical life in the Stalinist era; Kiril Tomoff (University of California, Riverside) outlined the vast and detailed historical picture of the efforts that the political elite in Moscow put, after the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, into rebuilding and strengthening the cultural ties between the nations of the Soviet empire with the aim of allowing some decentralization; Katy Romanou (European University of Cyprus) described the duplicitous atmosphere during the Nazi occupation of Greece, on the one hand marked by famine and the atrocities perpetrated by the occupying soldiers, but on the other hand just as engaged in the assimilation of German culture, which had schooled many Greek musicians; and Anna Dalos (Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest) presented the work of the first Hungarian neo-avant-gardist-oriented music group, founded in 1970 as the New Music Studio. In relation to this last subject, I was struck by the fact that Hungarian musical culture wasn’t by far as isolated as the Romanian one. On the contrary: although members of the youth wing of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party, those musicians managed to study and perform the latest European and American scores while

also boldly experimenting themselves and claiming none other than John Cage, the very symbol of “imperialist libertinism”, as their source of inspiration. Of course, even if they tolerated it, such a cultural openness was closely watched by the communist authorities, so that the paper’s author had quite some lessons to learn in the “double discourse” technique and even in the dissident attitude that the members of the New Music Studio had to adopt.

And now we must give the floor, and his dues, to the conference’s honoured guest: celebrated American musicologist Richard Taruskin, who concluded the series of lectures by his own, distinct public conference, with a – provoking, as usual – title: *Prokofieff’s Problems . . . and Ours*, a two-hour presentation, intense, succulent, and brimming with memorable enunciations.¹⁰ In short, the main problem which marked Prokofiev’s destiny was the way the composer related to the realities of Soviet life and at the same time the way they left a definitive mark on his most popular works. It’s extremely likely that Prokofiev regretted returning to his native country, for the many privileges and advantages with which the governmental authorities had tempted him were short-lived, being in fact replaced with denunciations and harassments on ideological grounds. What with Prokofiev’s life taking a tragic turn, it’s all the more noteworthy that the composer should write most of his major works precisely during his Soviet period. And here is where “our problem” appears, “ours” who enjoy today this music: is it really alright to just carelessly revel in those works whose quality cost the composer so much? And is it really alright to like those – very well written, for that matter – pieces praising Stalin or the Soviet power?

The nuances, precautions, polemic accents of the answers suggested by Taruskin can’t be rendered here. Anyway, these are problems which obviously remain open. I for one found in the “Prokofiev case” as described by the lecturer a reconfirmation of the fact that music and musical creativity can, after all, escape unharmed by political oppression; its deepest levels, so difficult to catch in the girth of some definitive concepts, present man with one of their most beneficial yet risky powers: to bring out what is good and beautiful in all that seems most evil and ugly.

English version by Maria Monica Bojin

¹⁰ See http://www.nec.ro/data/pdfs/public-events/2018/october/2018-10-19_Poster_Prof_Richard_Taruskin.pdf, accessed on February 8th, 2019.

REFERENCES

Betz, Albrecht

1982 *Hanns Eisler: Political Musician*, transl. Bill Hopkins (Cambridge University Press).

Burney, Charles

1935 *A General History of Music*, ed. Frank Mercer (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company) (1776, first edition), [https://imslp.org/wiki/A_General_History_of_Music_\(Burney,_Charles\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/A_General_History_of_Music_(Burney,_Charles)).

Geertz, Clifford

1973 *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books).

Preda, Marin

1970 “Obsedantul deceniu” [Obsessive Decade], *Luceafărul* [Morning Star] 13/24 (424), June 13th, 1, 3.

Sandu-Dediu, Valentina (ed.)

2016 *Music in Dark Times: Europe East and West, 1930-1950* (Bucharest: Editura Universității Naționale de Muzică București).

Tismăneanu, Vladimir and Marius Stan

2015 *Dosar Stalin: Genialissimul Generalissim* [Stalin File: The Brilliantissimo Generalissimo] (Bucharest: Curtea Veche).

Văidean, Vlad

2018 “Muzici ale puterii, puteri ale muzicii” [Music of the Power, Powers of the Music], *Acord* 10/39-40, 7-11.