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Politico-ideological Distortions of Writing About Music in Romania. Case Study: Local Perception of Sergey Prokofiev*

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In 20th century Romania, texts on music were unable to stay clear of the political factor, reaching even, under the totalitarian regimes, extremely toxic levels of ideological infection. In the concrete case of how Russian and Soviet music was understood, such texts depended closely on Romania's political stance towards Moscow.

The interwar period

From the moment the Bolshevik Revolution changed the course of the World War I, and Romania, who had fought alongside Russia, found itself abandoned by this country after the armistice signed with Germany in March 1918, Romania's relations with Russia progressively deteriorated. Interwar Romanian politicians, argues historian Keith Hitchins, saw the Soviet Union as "Romania's hereditary enemy, always present, always menacing its very existence" (Hitchins 2012: 374). The apple of discord was Bessarabia, whose unification with Romania was ratified on October 28th, 1920 by England, France, and Romania, but was never recognized by the Soviet Union (see Hitchins 2012: 345, 373-376).

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These chilly politico-diplomatic relations heavily influenced the cultural relations between Romania and the Soviet Union as well. From a cultural and, by consequence, a musical point of view, the Soviet area was for us *terra incognita*. The pro-Western direction that Romania had at the time assumed made Soviet reality even harder to grasp. By contrast, Russian composers settled in the West, Igor Stravinsky and Sergey Prokofiev in particular, enjoyed immense popularity. Indeed, the influence these two had over the generation of Romanian composers emerging during the interwar period is unquestionable.[1] They both performed in Bucharest, as did many other figures of European music: Richard Strauss, Vincent d'Indy, Béla Bartók, Maurice Ravel among others (see Cosma 1991: 103).

Prokofiev visited Bucharest twice. In 1915, on his way to Rome to meet Diaghilev, he crossed Romania (our country hadn't yet entered World War I), documenting his journey in his diary. Here is what he wrote, on February 4-5th, about Bucharest:

> Bucharest styles itself a mini-Paris, and while this is a gross exaggeration since most of the streets are quite unworthy of the name, some of them are quite picturesque with reasonable shops and tree-lined pavements *à la* Paris. . . . I went into a café and glanced at a local French-language newspaper, to find out the latest news about the war. . . . I then walked about the town, lunched . . . in the luxurious hotel (Athénée Palace), . . . wrote postcards, sent a telegram to Mama, went out for another walk, this time deciding that the town was quite pleasant but still far from a "mini-Paris", and then returned to the hotel, where I wrote up these notes in the comfortable salon. (Prokofiev 2008: 11)

On March 1931, Prokofiev performed in Bucharest, giving a solo recital on March 25th and accompanying his wife, soprano Lina Llubera, on March 27th. Romanian audiences were by then familiar with Prokofiev, as his name had been present in the local press since as far back as 1922 (Manu 1922a, 1922b), and starting from 1927 some of his works (The *Classical* Symphony, the March and the orchestral suite from the opera *The Love for Three Oranges*, and the Piano Concerto No. 3) were introduced in the repertoire of the Bucharest Philharmonic.

The way the recitals were covered by the local press reveals both the positive reception of Prokofiev (but not of his wife) and the state of Romania's

[1] These influences are brilliantly researched in Firca 2002.

political relations – or rather, the lack thereof – with the Soviet Union. One such aspect is the interest taken in Soviet music, then unperformed and unknown in Romania. Prokofiev was living in the West for more than a decade now, but his visits to the Soviet Union got Romanian journalists strongly interested in "Bolshevik music". Prokofiev skillfully tempered the underlying political implication of such questions, which he otherwise answered quite cordially – "(Miron Grindea): About *Bolshevik music*? S. P.: About *Russian music lately*, if you wish" (italics mine; Grindea 1931a: 2).

Prokofiev first mentions Myaskovsky, whom he promptly calls "a great composer". He also signals the existence of

> two currents in today's Russian music: a traditionalist one, under the influence of Scriabin and whose leading representative is Sabaneyev, and another one, *à la page*, as represented by Mosolov, Shostakovich writing under the direct stimulus provided by the revolutionary atmosphere. (Grindea 1931a: 2)

He avoids criticizing the political factor in the Soviet Union, but when asked about "Russia's artistic effort" he answers: "Things worthy of all admiration are accomplished, *notwithstanding all the surrounding effervescence and unrest*" (italics mine; Grindea 1931a: 2).

Another aspect that Prokofiev's visit to Romania reveals is the prefabricated image of the "Bolshevik composer" as promoted by the local press. Even if such a look is more of a caricature, and would for that matter be difficult to attribute to any composer at all, a certain interviewer is surprised that Prokofiev doesn't fit the respective label:

> So here is Serge Prokofiev. . . . He doesn't look at all the way you probably imagined him: a Russian unkempt, ashen revolutionary wearing worker clothes, with a ripped tie, chewing on seeds while exhorting people to join the revolution. On the contrary, Serge Prokofiev is a slender, elegant young man, as blond as an Englishman, and his face, that of modest teenager, reflects the most perfect Bourgeois gentleness and kindness.[2]
> ("Serge Prokofiev speaks with *Rampa*" 1931: 1)

[2] It must be said that neither did the "teenage-like face" have anything to do with the Prokofiev's real age, as the composer would soon be 40.

Another image of Prokofiev employs yet another cliché, namely, the perception of the "Russian", the "Slav", as "odd": Prokofiev is seen as "a strange apparition, stylish to the point of being frightening. A huge Slav, with impenetrable glasses, smartly dressed to the most unexpected details. A hermetic prestidigitator, . . . as odd as all we know from Slavic spirituality" (Grindea 1931b: 3). He is also called "the undisputed poet of Slavic restlessness" (Grindea 1931a: 2).

These showy stereotypes illustrate the mysterious aura of a Soviet world, which neither the West nor Romania (yet) knew but by which both were fascinated. Prokofiev's ballet *Le pas d'acier*, an artistic transposition of the "exotic" Soviet world, commissioned by Diaghilev, first performed in Paris and reprised in London in 1927, was undoubtedly meant to satisfy such curiosity.

Some rather vague and puerile political nuances aside, Romanian critics unreservedly admire Prokofiev for both his pianistic and his compositional skills: "Prokofiev plays with dazzling virtuosity, and is sometimes capable of real acrobatics. . . . Prokofiev is the ideal performer of his works" (Grindea 1931b: 3).

The composer leads the chart of modern musical achievements, next to Stravinsky:

> Together with Stravinsky, Prokofiev is one of today's very few musicians who wouldn't think of looking forward until they had learnt, and became acquainted with, everything which had been previously done in music. For it is without doubt that, from all of the much-labored music of our times, only that of these two Russians has truly risen to prominence. (Sym 1931: 2)

Or: "The audience knew they had . . . a leading exponent of contemporary music before them" (Grindea 1931b: 3).

Some critics are even able to catch, in Prokofiev's modern sound, "glimpses of tenderness": "a poet of our fevered times, hiding beyond the appearance of a scientific laboratory and of a mathematical vision glimpses of tenderness" (Alexandrescu 1931: 8).

A balanced point of view, which acknowledges the solid traditional foundation on which Prokofiev's music is build and also suggests to Romanian composers of the time a viable approach to writing music, belongs to critic Emanoil Ciomac. He considers Prokofiev to be

> the herald of an art feeding on old nectar but desirous of speaking the tongue of the times we live in. . . . Here is a European and a

> true Russian, a traditionalist and an innovator, joined in one single powerful creator who doesn't need the input of folk music to affirm its ethnic personality. . . . Besides the singular pleasure we had in hearing him as a performer and an author, we are grateful to him for his guidance and the countless suggestions he offers our young Romanian music trying to find its way. . . . And his passage through this life will leave another kind of mark than that which is left by the ephemeral virtuosi. (Ciomac 1931: 4)

Emanoil Ciomac's view is poles apart from that of critics attacking Prokofiev with quasi-oxymoronic phrases destined to shock even more than the composer's very music had done:

> It seems that Prokofiev's compositions follow in the steps of futurist poetry. They, too, move without enchanting, conquer without charming, . . . are imposed by conviction instead of delighting with their beauty. It is a music which, while lacking length, is continuously startling. (Sym 1931: 2)

About Lina Llubera: Romanian press vs. personal memories

Unlike the Russian composer, his wife was bluntly criticized on the occasion of the recital on March 27th, 1931:

> Unfortunately, the brilliant innovator's interesting performance was followed by the arrival of soprano Lina Liubera,[3] Serge Prokofiev's wife. This is, for that matter, the only capacity which justified Mrs Liubera's presence at the Romanian Athenaeum. (Artemie 1931: 3)

Or:

> What we could by no means understand from last night's concert is why the illustrious guest would heap his program with Mrs Llubera's bizarre vocal divertimento, as she disfigured ten beautiful melodies and obstinately persisted in singing them all, without any particularly beautiful voice but a quarter tone lower.
> (Sym 1931: 2)

[3] This spelling of her name was frequently used by the Romanian press of the time.

Even if there aren't any surviving recordings of Lina Llubera, it's hard to believe Romanian journalists would have unfairly criticized the wife of such an "illustrious guest" as Prokofiev. It is interesting though that later, in an interview with Philip Ramey from July 9th, 1979, she recalled something else altogether about that performance: "The concert was such a success", that she was invited to dinner at a Bucharest Military Club, "and I had such success with all those military men that Serge was very much annoyed."[4] One of the officers with whom she danced promised her he would send her, in Paris, a couple of Romanian folk songs. He kept his promise, only Prokofiev "stuffed them in a closet, refusing to even look at them. 'Those are from your military admirer', he chafed" (Morrison 2013: 291).

Sadly, Prokofiev never came back. Romanian audiences would learn about him from time to time. In the following years, his becoming close to the Moscow regime could no longer be doubted. This news published in the newspaper *Rampa* on March 20th, 1937 speaks for itself:

> The well-known Russian composer S. S. Prokofiev recently returned from America, where he gave a series of concerts. Talking to the press, Prokofiev announced his intention to write a *Leninist Cantata*, to be completed on the 20th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. ("The composer S. S. Prokofiev composes a *Leninist Cantata*" 1937: 3).

The "glorious years" of Romanian Socialist Realism

During World War II, Romania, supporter of Nazi Germany, professed a firm anti-Communist, anti-Soviet position. The radical decision to change sides at the eleventh hour (August 23rd, 1944), so that the end of the war would not find it a defeated country, and the shift to the Soviet side – the so-called "Liberation Army" – set Romania on the implacable path of a forced Sovietization. With the abolishing of the monarchy three years later, on December 30th, 1947, Romania became a people's republic, completely under the control of the Communists.

As to music, the impact of this shift was all the more violent as it coincided with the crowning, Zhdanovist stage of the cultural ideologization in the Soviet Union. As such, music in Romania was forced to start over under the new political regime and the terror instituted by Andrei Zhdanov and his

[4] *Interview transcript*, Lina Prokofiev and Phillip Ramey, July 9th, 1979, 3-4, quoted in Morrison 2013: 291.

Resolution of 10 February 1948, which (also) reconfigured the very foundations of Romanian music production of the next decade.

Importing the Soviet model presupposed an aggressive politicization of music institutions, now to be purged of "Bourgeois exploiters", legionaries or "hostile elements", to see their musicians censored and intimidated, and to have their composers and performers undergoing a political "reeducation" through "working visits" in factories and plants. A key institution and intimately connected to music writing, the Society of Romanian Composers, whose directors had been Enescu, Jora, Brăiloiu – all three, now out of consideration –, was turned, in 1949, in the Union of Composers. It would be now led by Matei Socor, an ex-Avant-garde composer who had studied in Germany, and the author of the Union of Composers' Resolution of 4-5 February 1952, the Romanian version of the famous Soviet Resolution. Among others things, it required that Romanian composers "fight for the assimilation of the Socialist Realism method" ("On the Development of Music in the RPR"[5] 1952: 8) and stigmatized "formalism" and "cosmopolitism".

So what happens to writing about music in these altered circumstances? After 1948, music criticism and musicology became an important instrument of propaganda. In 1950, *Muzica* magazine, "the official journal of the Union of Composers" ("On the Development of Music in the RPR" 1952: 9) and the dedicated main transmitter of the ruling party's commands, was (re)issued. During the first years, its pages contained a significant amount of translations of articles by Soviet composers or musicologists. With the afore-mentioned Resolution of 1952, researching Soviet music became, for Romanian musicologists, part of the job description: "The in-depth study of Soviet composers' and musicologists' work is an essential condition for assimilating the rich experience of Soviet musical art" ("On the Development of Music in the RPR" 1952: 10).

New circumstances, a new Prokofiev

What is surprising is that when writing about Soviet music Romanian authors avoid direct reference to its foremost representatives, preferring to acclaim Soviet output in its entirety. Between 1948 and 1952 Shostakovich or Prokofiev are rarely and cautiously referred to, mainly because they had been criticized in the Resolution of 10 February 1948. The musical works which validate the occasional mention of such names are those written after the "lesson" the composers had been taught in 1948 and, possibly, awarded the Stalin Prize.

[5] The Romanian People's Republic was the official name of the state between 1947-1965.

In 1953, when Stalin's death, called an "irretrievable loss", made the headlines, *Muzica* published, on pages 47-48, a "Sergey Procofiev" portrait to mark the composer's passing away. The article, written by musicologist Ovidiu Varga, is the first on Prokofiev by this magazine (and most likely the first in the whole of post-war Romanian press): "The news of the death of eminent Soviet musician S. S. Procofiev, People's Artist of the USSR,[6] six-time winner of the Stalin Prize, aggrieved Soviet musicians and Progressive artists around the world" (Varga 1953: 47).

This article also launched the official version of Prokofiev's life and work. The musician's main "vulnerability" was related to his having lived abroad between 1917 and 1936, which period had to either be surgically removed or criticized as convincingly as possible and in accordance to the ideology. As such, comments on Prokofiev's oeuvre by Ovidiu Varga, Zeno Vancea (1954: 11-14) or Alfred Hoffman (1961: 29-33) follow a default, predictable pattern:

1) praising the works written until 1917, his *Classical* Symphony (1916-1917) in particular;

2) ignoring almost completely the works written abroad, seen as marred by the "formalist currents" of the West;

3) rapturously discussing the "beneficial influence" of the new Soviet life on his oeuvre.

According to the three sources, Prokofiev returned to his homeland, this time to stay, in 1932.

Let's discuss each aspect one at a time.

1) While Ovidiu Varga will only speak about the "youthful, fresh, bright works, such as the *Classical* Symphony (1916-1917), or profoundly Russian, like the *Tales of an Old Grandmother* (1918)" (Varga 1953: 47), Zeno Vancea draws some distinctions, meant to distance the *Classical* Symphony from "the spirit of the so-called neoclassicism, so fashionable in the West": "Classical in the best sense of the word! . . . Far from being an archaizing work in the spirit of the so-called neoclassicism so fashionable in the West, it possesses a great living force, the very image of our times" (Vancea 1954: 12).

The *Classical* Symphony is also depicted as a triumph over the poisonous influences of the Russian pre-revolutionary cultural environment:

> We can see that for Prokofiev the contact with modern art, at an age when personality and critical thinking weren't yet fully devel-

[6] Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

> oped, resulted in his being rather inconsistent in his beginnings as a composer. His positive traits would nevertheless triumph over this confusion and his healthy instinctual realism would guide him towards a strong, living music. (Hoffman 1961: 28)

2) As regards the period of Prokofiev's peregrinations outside the Soviet Union, critics insist on the sterility of the works composed during that time. Zeno Vancea states:

> Prokofiev never stopped writing while he was abroad. . . . But, exposed even more to the formalist currents, deprived . . . of a living bond with the Russian folk music, surrounded by a stifling and shrill atmosphere of the American jazz and of the latest "tendencies" of formalism, the composer was losing his intellectual vigor. His art was decaying. (Vancea 1954: 12)

Hoffman reprised the idea of a less and less inspired Prokofiev, but attributes this state of things not to the West, but to a Russian spring "run dry":

> Prokofiev was the first to realize, and better than anybody else, that during his endless peregrinations abroad his art had in fact lost that life-giving spring which was Russian reality, Russian culture and tradition, and, in general, the environment where he had blossomed into a talented composer. This is why, when he returned to the Soviet Union in 1932, he did so after being finally convinced that only there would he be able to see clearly what the path of his creative maturity was. (Hoffman 1961: 32)

As opposed to other authors, Hoffman discusses some of the works written in the West, under the pretense that, in composing them, Prokofiev had used material from his Russian period: as an example, he sees Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 3 as a "masterpiece of modern piano literature, based in great measure on an older melodic material, dating from 1913 and 1917" (Hoffman 1961: 31).

3) As regards the "blooming" Soviet period, the commentators' sometimes tone turns pathetic.

> Under the beneficial influence of a new Soviet life, full of light, fresh air, creative enthusiasm, under the fatherly guidance of the

> Party, Prokofiev is determined to fight and succeeds in gradually amending his view of composition and to successfully set foot on the path of Realism. This was not an easy fight, but the love for his Soviet Homeland, for the people helped Prokofiev win.
> (Varga 1953: 47-48)

"Disgusted by the rotten Western life and art, following closely, with ever increased interest and passion, the great changes and the wonderful social and cultural achievements taking place in his homeland, Prokofiev returns to the Soviet Union after an absence of several years", where for him "a new era, one of prodigious activity, begins" (Vancea 1954: 12).

The three mentioned authors insist on a number of works belonging to the so-called "Soviet period", which they consider illustrative of Prokofiev's entire oeuvre: the symphonic fairy tale *Peter and the Wolf* (1936), the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* (1935–1936), the cantata *Alexander Nevsky* (1938-1939), the cantata *Zdravitsa* (written for Stalin's 60th birthday), the oratorio *On Guard for Peace* and the vocal orchestral suite *Winter Bonfire* – two works for which Prokofiev was awarded (for the sixth time) the Stalin Prize in 1951 –, and the Symphony No. 7 (1952).

Ideology again permeates musicology: *Peter and the Wolf* "wishes to give children a story which, instead of frightening them, as bourgeois fairy tales do, helps them gain confidence in their own strengths and skills" (Vancea 1954: 13).

About *Romeo and Juliet*: "Infused with a strong realism, the music sings of the pure love between two young people whose path to happiness is obstructed by the mores of a society filled with prejudice and contradictions" (Varga 1953: 48).

Zdravitsa is, in Varga's opinion, the work "where the composer, using folk lyrics, warmly and sincerely expresses the Soviet people's love and gratitude for the great leader and friend of the nations" (Varga 1953: 48). In his turn, Vancea considers *Zdravitsa* to be "perhaps the most popular of all the works by the Russian composer that we are familiar with" (Vancea 1954: 13).

As for Hoffman, he doesn't mention this composition at all. His silence on the subject could be explained politically: with the "condemning of Stalin's cult of personality" by the new Moscow regime (in Nikita Krushchev's speech on February 25th, 1956, at the 20th Party Congress; see Cavendish 2006), the works dedicated to Stalin are out of the limelight. Basically, the piece which Zeno Vancea had placed among the composer's most popular would now fall into oblivion.

When mentioning Prokofiev's "irony" or "sarcasm", writers make use of various tricks and ideological devices.

> Inheriting all the contradictory tendencies of the pre-revolutionary cultural decadence, the young artist ostentatiously turns to a concrete, palpable, material, masculine art. . . . His youth meant a real burst of enthusiastic creative energy, which seems to laugh at sterile refinements and feeble intellectualism. In his music, therefore, a biting, almost sarcastic humor makes itself heard. (Hoffman 1961: 29)

But – Hoffman insists on pointing out – a certain "poetic sensibility" is "just as characteristic to Prokofiev as is joke or irony and, even if it would reach full bloom only in his adult years, on a closer look one can already distinguish it in his first compositions" (Hoffman 1961: 30) – for example, in *Visions fugitives*.

Hoffman's theoretical exposé is accompanied by a number of musical examples. He quotes, among others, the first three bars of the slow movement of the Piano Sonata No. 7, on which he comments: "With time, in the heart of the former opponent of Romanticism an *almost Schumannian poetic sensibility* developed" (italics mine; Hoffman 1961: 32).

Refined as he was, Hoffman could not completely ignore the quotation from Schumann's lied *Wehmut*, but neither could he mention it as such. His allusive, laconic and somewhat cynical comment on the Schumannian reference perhaps reflects its author's inability to ideologically explain the so explicit presence of a feeling of "sadness" in a work Prokofiev wrote at the height of the Soviet period . . .

A radical change in the perception of Prokofiev

The general tone and the ideological contents especially disappear without a trace from such articles only five years later, when *Muzica* magazine (2/1966 issue) publishes a completely different study on Prokofiev, Sergiu Sarchizov's "Prokofiev today". In the post-war Romanian literature on Prokofiev, the article, occasioned by neither the composer's birth nor death anniversary, displays a singular freedom of expression.

To begin with, the author had utilized a Western bibliography, and openly owns to it: "A recent American statistics on the incidence of certain names on Western concert programs, places Prokofiev ahead of many other contemporary composers and shows the musician taking the lead and leaving behind even such a performed author as Stravinsky" (Sarchizov 1966: 27).

Not only does he speak about Prokofiev's popularity in the West, but he also mentions Stravinsky, who had been boycotted and completely ignored by Romanian musicology of the 1950s.[7] The spiciest bit is the one where the author derides the ideological charge of the periodization of Prokofiev's work in use until recently:

> Musicologists distinguish between three such periods: the *Russian* one (1907-1918), the *Western* one (1918-1933), finally – the *Soviet* one (1933-1953). On a strictly biographical level, these three periods indeed exist, and such a classification eases the study of Prokofiev's oeuvre. (Sarchizov 1966: 28)

It nevertheless – the author goes on – "may generate a confusion to be avoided only by means of a thorough knowledge of his whole output, of an in-depth analysis of the less-performed works" (Sarchizov 1966: 28). But Sarchizov aims at proving precisely that there is a "great, surprising stylistic unity in the 'Prokofiev case', a unity which seems to defy any hasty classification into 'periods', with its inevitable value-related implications" (Sarchizov 1966: 28).

Among his fellow musicologists, Sarchizov is the one to firmly, explicitly vote against rating Prokofiev's work on ideological criteria. He also speaks without any political *parti pris* about having studied, in the "Contemporary Music Evenings" series, works by Debussy, Stravinsky, Schönberg and others, about the collaboration with Diaghilev, about irony, the grotesque or "the characters' psychological depth" (Sarchizov 1966: 28) in *The Gambler* after Dostoevsky. He remarkably introduces Romanian musicology to such pieces as *Ala i Lolli*, *Chout*, *The Gambler*, *The Love for Three Oranges*, *The Fiery Angel*, *Le pas d'acier*, *The Prodigal Son*.

In speaking about the composer's return to the Soviet Union, too, Sarchizov shocks and defies the ideology of the time: "In fact, after returning home, Prokofiev does by no means distance himself from the style of the so-called 'Western' period. Maybe only as regards the subject of his works would one more often encounter a Soviet theme" (Sarchizov 1966: 29-30). And there are countless examples such as these.

The key to understanding this new perception of Prokofiev, this pervading feeling of liberation, is also due to the winds of political change. A year after Nicolae Ceaușescu took power, Romania would affirm its inde-

[7] His name features though in an extensive article translated from Russian, where Stravinsky is criticized for being "formalist" (Kabalevski 1952: 48-59).

pendence from Moscow, and as such the Communist Party accepted (maybe even encouraged?) a certain cultural openness to the West. It was a period of uttermost political relaxation, albeit a short one, culminating by the "1968 moment" (Ceaușescu's refusal to participate in the Warsaw Pact troops' invasion of Czechoslovakia). The subsequent aggressive nationalism from 1971 onwards in many ways mirrored the Stalinist period (Ceaușescu's cult of personality). In the 1970s and 1980s, in a time of unprecedented cultural isolation, Romanian musicologists were forced to focus on the Romanian musical output. Until 1991, the year marking the composer's 100th birth anniversary, when the composer's visit to Bucharest was again brought up by Octavian Lazăr Cosma (1991: 103-112), Romanian musicologists didn't fully engage in researching his music.

A look at the Romanian texts on Prokofiev produced in the interwar period and until the 1990s shows the absence of detailed musical analyses or in-depth musicological comments. These texts are rather writings (articles) by music critics (Grindea, Simionescu Râmniceanu, Ciomac, Alexandrescu, Hoffman), composers (Vancea, Sarchizov) or historiographers (Varga, O. L. Cosma).

Despite the ideologically marked twists and turns of the way Prokofiev's music was perceived in our country, Romanian performers nevertheless did perform it, thus giving the audience the chance to meet an enduring cultural landmark, which transcends ephemeral political regimes.

English version by Maria Monica Bojin

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