

## A perspective on the musical criticism of Iasi from the interwar period

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**Abstract:** The advantage of learning history through the perspective of the criticism of a certain period lies in the fact that the journalist does not merely reproduce the information, but also describes the state emanating from the events commented upon, himself being contemporary with them. For us, readers of later decades, newspapers are, objectively speaking, a genuine history textbook. However, discovering interwar periodicals from Iasi has proven to be a fairly difficult task. In order to identify the titles from Iasi, I have consulted the catalogues of three major libraries in the city: “Mihai Eminescu” Central University Library, “Gheorghe Asachi” County Library and the library of “George Enescu” National University of Arts. In this endeavor, I discovered titles that appear either in the pre-war or in the post-war periods. Moreover, publications such as *Curierul de Iași* issued both before and after the wars but ceased their activity in the interwar period. Finally, the titles that circulated in the interwar period and could be accessed are *Flacăra Iașului*, *Ziarul Opinia*, *Evenimentul*, *Însemnări ieșene* and *Ziarul Scânteia*. Starting from their pages, I have attempted to reconstruct a side of the interwar artistic climate of Iași.

**Keywords:** history; newspapers; interwar; musical life; artistic.

### Introduction

The first major war of the modern era that shook the whole world had, unsurprisingly, a profoundly destabilizing result, both in the political and economic climates, as well as in others, through its macro-level domino effect. Once with the end of the conflict, the population, still disoriented, mistrustful, cautious, dares to resume its daily course of life, a setting favorable for sprouting feelings of trust and fulfillment. In this period, artists from various fields, who had considerably reduced public presence, resume their activity at a normal pace. In music, public manifestations increase in frequency, music schools regain their rightful place and, generally, the public artistic activity is experiencing a revival. The newspapers of the time allow us to discover a perspective of life in this particular period.

Apart from the historical publications which addressed a certain type of readers, the periodicals overall make up a fresco which mirrors reality, naturally, through the lens of the journalist who brings a quasi-objective contribution. The advantage of learning history through the media of the time lies in the fact that the journalist does not merely reproduce the information, but also describes the state emanating from the events commented upon, himself being contemporary with them. For us, readers of later decades, newspapers are, objectively speaking, a true history textbook. From the area of musicology, the concern of historians George Pascu and Melania Boțocan for the music from Iasi generated a reference work entitled *Hronicul muzicii ieșene*<sup>1</sup> [Chronicle of Iași music].

However, discovering the titles of the interwar periodicals from Iași has proven quite challenging. In order to identify the titles from Iasi, I have consulted the catalogues of three major libraries in the city: “Mihai Eminescu” Central University Library, “Gh. Asachi” County Library and the library of “George Enescu” National University of Arts. In this endeavor, I discovered titles that appear either in the pre-war or in the post-war periods. Moreover, publications such as *Curierul de Iași* appeared both before and after the wars but ceased their activity in the interwar period. Finally, the titles that circulated in the interwar period and could be accessed are *Flacăra Iașului*, *Însemnări ieșene*, *Ziarul Scânteia*, *Ziarul Opinia* and *Evenimentul*. Starting from their pages, I have attempted to reconstruct a side of the interwar artistic climate of Iași. A first observation is that *Evenimentul* paid greater interest in the culture of Iasi than the *Opinia*, which stands in concise announcements about certain musical events, especially operettas, cinematographic events and various celebrations with entertainment music. Apart from the activities with a declared cultural/musical purpose, music in the interwar period was integrated in events such as cinema movies accompanied *live*, various celebrations, commemorations and anniversaries where the music was ensured by the military orchestra.

Given the lengthy 20-year interval between the two World Wars, a research covering the entire period requires, on the one hand, consulting numerous periodicals and, on the other hand, a long-term focus. Incidentally, this paper is declared to be only the beginning of a larger, more complex and, undoubtedly, more than necessary research. Why necessary? Because learning the past is not only a moral duty, but also a means of understanding the present. The modern musical life of Iasi could be considered to have written its first lines right then, in the interwar period, both challenging and flourishing. In this regard, bringing some of the journalistic contributions that are not available to

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<sup>1</sup> George Pascu, Melania Boțocan, *Hronicul muzicii ieșene* [Iași Music Chronicle], Iași, Editura Noel, 1997.

the general public into an accessible environment is a benefit for our culture. It must be established from the very beginning that the following observations refer mainly to the years 1918-1920.

If we go behind the scenes of the research process for a moment, we find that spending a good few hours a day consulting newspapers, especially old ones, typed in small font, erased and yellowed by time, is in itself a demanding job. However, transposing oneself into the spirit of the time through these vividly written pages of history is a true delight! One learns about political and economic life, about daily interests, conflicts and their source, and even about certain items available in shops. Well, in all this turmoil – political changes, intrigues, economic challenges, shortcomings – art is an island surrounded by the waters of society: it cannot be fully integrated, but neither can it be completely separated.

### 1. Symphonic and chamber music

According to the newspapers of the time, the period immediately following World War I was marked by the artists' efforts to revive cultural life. The endeavor required all the more work since, at that time, music institutions still did not exist. The philharmonic would open its doors only in 1942, and the Opera even later, in 1956. Thus, we have the opportunity to see both local bands and guest ensembles or artists on the stages from Iași.

Symphonic music was mostly supported by the “George Enescu” Symphony Society orchestra established in Iasi in October 1918 and having George Enescu himself as the honorary president. Therefore, we owe him the success of this artistic beginning that our city harnessed to ensure the continuity of musical life. The first concert was hosted by the National Theatre on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October, under the musical direction of Mircea Bârsan. This institution would also host a good part of the city's future musical events. At the following concerts, George Enescu himself and, later, Mihail Jora took the conductor's podium.<sup>2</sup> For the public willing to break away from the harsh reality and to reconnect with art through the universal language of music, there were, even then, performance programs that included, as reported in *Evenimentul* of February 15<sup>th</sup> 1919, “explanatory theoretical notes of the pieces being performed”<sup>3</sup>. The orchestra's repertoire consisted of established classical works, but also works by lesser-known composers, such as Pietro Nardini.

A common presence in the newspapers of the time is Eduard Caudella, who publishes consistent texts. Caudella was so involved in the musical activity of Iași, that every performance seemed to occupy a well-established place in his schedule. In an article-chronicle on the 14<sup>th</sup> symphonic concert of

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. George Pascu, Melania Boțocan, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> “Evenimentul” newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 10, Friday, 15 February 1919, p. 2.

the “Enescu” Society, published in *Evenimentul* from March 16<sup>th</sup> 1919, the musician wrote:

I am delighted that I could attend once again a concert given by the musical society ‘George Enescu’. During the week, it is impossible for me [to do so], no matter how hard I try, due to my particular occupations.<sup>4</sup>

Eduard Caudella’s chronicles contain both considerations related to interpretation and brief historical-stylistic reviews. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> of March 1919 *Evenimentul* issue, the musician explains that his journalistic activity is due to the presence of Enescu and his society, and that with the end of the series of concerts, he will make room for other critics. In the first interwar years, Maximilian Costin, Dr. Emil Savini, Don Dièse, Alexandu Cișman, as well as an author who goes by the abbreviation “Ar. Foc” also signed articles related to the musical events in Iasi<sup>5</sup>.

Important names such as George Enescu, Antonin Ciolan, Mircea Bârsan, Enrico Mezzetti, conductor Gheorghe Ionescu, cellists Nicu Teodorescu and Flor Breviman, tenor Giacomo Borelli, pianists Ilie Sibianu and Vasile Onofrei, violinists Alexandru Garabet and Alexandru Stavache and Traian Ionașcu and others enlivened the musical life of the city. Some of them are only mentioned in the announcements of upcoming concerts, others are the actual subject of articles. For example, George Enescu was, naturally, the central point of several articles.

Let’s linger on Caudella's article published in *Evenimentul* of the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1919, entitled *Recitalul Beethoven dat de Maestrul George Enescu și d-nul Flor Breviman* [Beethoven Recital given by Maestro George Enescu and Mr. Flor Breviman]. Here, while admiring the musician’s multiple interpretive talent, the author concludes:

When one has to choose what to admire more of the maestro’s playing the piano or the violin, you have to say ‘mon coeur balance entre la brune et la blonde’ (i. e. between the piano and violin). He is perfect and a great artist on both instruments.<sup>6</sup>

In the same newspaper, two days later, an article-open letter is published, *To Master Enescu*, the “sender” being Dr. Emil Savini, one of the founding members - together with Dr. Constantin Ion Parhon - of the Romanian Society of Neurology, Psychiatry and Endocrinology, established in 1919. The author confirms the unwritten conviction that there is an intimate, unspoken

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<sup>4</sup> Eduard Caudella, *XIVth symphonic concert*, “Evenimentul” newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 35, Saturday, 16 March 1919, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> “Evenimentul” newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 12, Sunday, 17 February 1919, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Eduard Caudella, *Recitalul Beethoven dat de Maestrul George Enescu și d-nul Flor Breviman* [Beethoven Recital given by Master George Enescu and Mr. Flor Breviman], “Evenimentul” newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 10, Friday, 15 February 1919, p. 2.

connection between medicine and music that goes beyond scientific records. A fragment of the text of an almost poetic lyricism will prove eloquent:

Your calling is great, your duty sublime. Go among your own and preach them peace and unity. Your divine art makes you almighty. In the spell of your harmonies all evil thoughts are bound and numbed forever like a fly in a spider's web. For you, at will, can make us laugh or cry, hope or despair, melt with pain or jump for joy.<sup>7</sup>

Another musician who is the subject of an unsigned article, also from *Evenimentul* (20<sup>th</sup> February 1919), is the cellist Nicu Teodorescu. The following is a fragment extracted from the admiring text:

The title of a "great artist" that the critics grant with such ease and abundance is fully deserved by Nicu Teodorescu. The manner in which he performed the de Saint-Saens concerto in the last symphony concert ranks him at the top of our cellists. (...) For us, who have known him for a long time, his success was a normality, but for the general public, it was a revelation.<sup>8</sup>

The concert from May also had positive reverberations, after which the instrumentalist was addressed in a laudatory article (signed by Ar. Foc.). The appreciation focuses on his ability to acquire professional training without having studied abroad:

Through his own work, he has become the artist most beloved by the public. He did not go among foreigners (...). Here he carried the apostolate of true art and succeeded in growing on the public.<sup>9</sup>

The pages of the March 12<sup>th</sup> 1919 *Evenimentul* highlight the artistic personality of the tenor Giacomo Borelli, soloist of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. In the anonymous article dedicated to the recital presented with the pianist Enrico Mezzetti, the singer is described as "*one of the world-renowned tenors, having a very strong, voluminous voice that knows how to impress.*"<sup>10</sup>

We learn opinions about the pianist Ilie Sibianu from the article signed by Don Dièse regarding the Chopin Recital (*Evenimentul*, the 29<sup>th</sup> of March 1919):

He had a strong temperament, sonority, phrasing, feeling, elegance, in short, all the qualities of a high class musician and pianist; but for him to

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<sup>7</sup> Emil Savini, *Maestro Enescu*, "Evenimentul" newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 12, Sunday, 17 February 1919, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> "Evenimentul" newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 19, Wednesday, 20 February 1919, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ar. Foc., *Nicu Teodorescu Concert*, "Evenimentul" newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 64, Thursday, 8 May 1919, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Giacomo Borelli Concert*, "Evenimentul" newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 31, Tuesday, 12 March 1919, p. 1.

interpret and “sing” Chopin as he did on Monday in the University Aula, we certainly did not expect.<sup>11</sup>

The author of the article insists on the verb “to sing”, wishing to highlight the almost vocal lyricism the pianist manages to obtain on playing the instrument.

## 2. Operetta music

Starting with the autumn of 1919, the Avram Nicolau (formerly Gabrielescu) Operetta Company had a recurring interpretative activity in Iași. Avram Nicolau was a senator in the county then called Timiș-Torontal, and also an artist involved in theater. In 1918, he led the Grigore Gabrielescu Company, later renamed after his name, which toured the big Romanian cities, definitely including the city of Iasi.

The band’s repertoire included such titles as *The Violinist* by Edmund Eysler, *Where the Lark Sings* by Franz Lehár (1918), *Grape Harvest* by Oskar Nedbal (1916), *The Black Forest Girl* by Leon Jessel (1917), *The Carnival Fairy* by Emmerich Kalman and *The Miss from the Post*, operetta whose author I have not identified. The Gabrielescu Company included Jean Niculescu, Virginia Miciora, Lică Rădulescu, Lily Tănăsescu, Nicu Kanner, Gina Hermeziu, Marilena Bodescu, Ana Grand and Bob Hopkins, according to a small publication at the Jsidor A. Stern & Emil Embra Publishing House, Bucharest, 1918, entitled *Caricatura sub ocupație [Caricature under occupation]* (Text by A. De Herz, Adrian Maniu, Ion Pribeagu, Ap. Rodan and Orfeu). The announcements of the performances of the Avram Nicolau Company (formerly Gabrielescu) could only be found in the *Opinia* newspaper.

Another part of the operetta shows was organized by the Israeli Operetta Drama and Comedies Company. A few names that stood out are Askenazy, Goldenberg and Clara Young. This company used to play in the Sidoli Theater-Cinema.

## 3. Opera music

In the lyrical theater area, an important role was played by the guest companies, given the fact that, as previously mentioned, the local music institutions had not yet come into existence. Thus, the opera performances offered by the Bessarabia Opera Company led by Jean Bobescu and Bojena Belousova were highly welcome. A four-day tour - June 28-July 1, 1919 - announced important titles that the audience in Iasi had the privilege of

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<sup>11</sup> Don Dièse, *Chopin Recital*, “Evenimentul” newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 45, Friday, 29 March 1919, p. 1.

watching, namely *Cavalleria rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni, *The Queen of Spades* by Piotr Ilici Tchaikovsky, *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi, *La Juive* by Jacques Fromental Halévy, *Pagliacci* by Ruggero Leoncavallo and a scene from *Eugene Onegin* by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, all under the musical direction of Jean Bobescu, a conductor who graduated from the Conservatory of Iasi.

#### 4. Conservatory activity

Another compartment of the cultural life in Iasi is the activity of the Conservatory. Some of the students of the time became prominent figures in the composition or performance field. From *Evenimentul* newspaper, where some of the exam sessions are recorded, we learn information about students with promising results.

The piano exam in Professor Sibianu's class on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 1919 is declared to have been "a real musical celebration"<sup>12</sup>. Pianist Migueta Barberis, sister of the composer Mansi Barberis, stood out. The recital given during the exam included *Toccata* by Bach, studies by Liszt and Chopin and *Fantasia in F minor* by Chopin. "The performance exceeded all expectations. The temperament and sentiment she performed with prove a deep musical skill, which attracted the accolades of the examining jury."<sup>13</sup>

Many instrumentalists stood out from the violin class of professor Athanasie Teodorini as well. Over time, they proved to be pillars of the performing arts in Iași and beyond: Mansi Barberis, Avy Abramovici, Alexandru Garabet, Jean Bobescu, Vasile Filip and many others.

#### Conclusions

A review of the musical life in Iași from the beginning of the interwar period would first of all show a decentralization, due to the lack of local music institutions, as mentioned above. In the context of the interwar musical events, we can thus distinguish performers from the local sphere, on the one hand – i.e. established artists, but also conservatory disciples – and from other cultural institutions in Romania and abroad on the other hand. As for the genres integrated in the repertoire, they include symphonic music, chamber music, opera and operetta.

What we are today in terms of musical public life is owed mostly to the interwar period artistic work. All that's left for us is to cherish the positive aspects of history and fulfill our duty of further enriching the great musical work with both its classical and modern infusions.

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<sup>12</sup> "Evenimentul" newspaper, Year XXVII, No. 100, Wednesday, 25 June 1919, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

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