

Aurel Stroe – Dominants of Musical Thought (90 years since birth)

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Abstract: Aurel Stroe, one of the greatest post-Enescian Romanian composers, is also a master of putting into words the metabolism of the great axiological ideas of humanity. At his 90th birth anniversary, given the originality of his discourse and his system of thought, Aurel Stroe needs an analytical synthesis of his entire vision of sound art (not just of his compositional system). Articulated under the sign of interdisciplinarity, his streams of ideas are so consistent that they draw their energy from different spheres of human culture, supporting a dramaturgy of creation that proposes incommensurable models juxtaposed within the same work. The morphogenetic music (born from the translation of the great mathematical theories of time into sound art), the composition with several tuning systems or within which immeasurable cultural dominants are confronted, give rise to a type of work of art that faces the same main difficulty as every valuable creation: sustaining its unity (which inevitably, breaks down, endangering its very quality). This paper offers some of the strategies the composer harnesses to handle his musical material, under the conditions of an extreme semantic difficulty: that of the expressive stabilization of the work in the imbalanced context caused by the coexistence of incommensurable elements. In this framework, other favorite topics are: the ontology of the work of art (and its sufferings in the modern context), the reflection of the theories of bifurcations, fractals and the chaos theory in sound art, the application of thermodynamic principles in the sound compositional space. The result of such strategies is dramatic, catastrophic, collapsing structures that propose unpredictable dynamics. A theoretician without equal, deeply knowledgeable of the great musical systems, he saw them as sound expressions with universal consequences, of great magnitude.

Keywords: modernity; dynamic; chaos; ontology; catastrophe.

1. Introduction: Milestones of Aurel Stroe's life and work

Aurel Stroe, one of the greatest post-Enescian Romanian composers, is also a master of putting into words the metabolism of the great axiological ideas of humanity. At his 90th birth anniversary, given the originality of his discourse and his system of thought, Aurel Stroe needs an analytical synthesis of his entire sound art vision (not just of his compositional system). On the 5th of May 2022, master Aurel Stroe would have turned 90 years old, fulfilling a

destiny that had to face many challenges: those of freedom that he assumed at any cost, even that of leaving his country in the face of the communist calamity that was about to take over. Simple yet so complex, close to the youth and yet so sophisticated, good-hearted to the point of being beyond reproach, Aurel Stroe – The musician who saw ideas¹ was not only a great composer and thinker of artistic phenomena, but also a mentor of musical consciousnesses, a human being of rare generosity, who shared his musical joys with a child's candor.

Aurel Stroe was also a master of putting into words the metabolism of the great axiological ideas of humanity, of his entire vision of sound art (not just of his compositional system). Articulated under the sign of interdisciplinarity, his streams of ideas were so consistent that they drew their energy from different spheres of human culture, supporting a dramaturgy of creation that proposed incommensurable models juxtaposed within the same work. A system of such novelty could only be supported by a complex musicological apparatus, never fully investigated until now, which must be illuminated by specifying its dominants.

Born on the 5th of May 1932 in Bucharest, in the family of the illustrious pediatrician who – from the position of father and trainer – knew how to place his son, from a very early age, in the presence of the greatest musical values that he himself admired and assimilated, accompanying him to the greatest festivals in Europe and in the greatest concert halls in Bucharest. The family took great care of the early education of the young musician who was under the tutelage of the greatest professors of the time: from the pianist Maria Fotino he learned (1951-1956) the expressive mysteries of music, the way in which music narrates its paths through sounds. His studies in composition were carried out with Mihail Andricu, in harmony with Marțian Negrea and in orchestration with Theodor Rogalski. During his courses in Darmstadt, he assimilated the secrets of the avant-garde, a decade and a half later, alongside Mauricio Kagel, György Ligeti and Karlheinz Stockhausen, continuing his research at the International Comparative Musicology Institute with Alain Danielou in the period 1972-1973.

Visiting professor in the university musical environments from Europe and the United States of America in the last two decades of the 20th century (where he had a unique pioneering role in computer-generated music, a role that was never officially recognized), Aurel Stroe also developed a career in teaching at the Bucharest Conservatory after 1962. After leaving the country – where communism was heavily exerting its constraints at cultural level as well

¹ Dan Dediu, *Aurel Stroe, muzicianul care vede idei* [Aurel Stroe, The Musician who Saw Ideas], “Evenimentul Zilei” newspaper, 06 Octombrie 2008, retrieved from <https://evz.ro/aurel-stroe-muzicianul-care-vedea-idei-823405.html>

as in the others, Aurel Stroe became a composition teacher at the Hochschule für Musik in Mannheim after 1986.

He would however return to Bucharest as a professor after the Revolution. In 2002, Aurel Stroe was awarded the “Gottfried von Herder” Prize at the University of Vienna, in recognition of his exceptional merits. The master passed away on the 3rd of October 2008, in Mannheim. He was returned to his homeland, as was his wish. His courses in Bușteni (started in 1992 and held even when he was barely able to move) were his way of conveying some secrets to which not everybody had access, that one had to experience before being able to understand. It was only there that I heard of the connection between thermodynamics and ontology – musically speaking.

An extremely selective list of his creation includes an important series of works dedicated to the stage (being a man of tragedy), among which: *Ça n'aura pas le Prix Nobel* (opera in 3 acts, 1969-71), *La paix* (anti-opera in 3 acts based on Aristophanes – 1973), the comedy-mystery *Das Weltkonzil* (*comédie mystère*, based on V. S. Soloviev – 1988), but especially the *Orestia* trilogy based on Aeschylus (composed of the works *Agamemnon* (*Orestia I*, music for theater in 3 acts – 1981), *Les Choéphores* (*Orestia II*, music for the theatre in 3 acts – 1977) and *Eumenides* (*Orestia III*, opera in 3 acts based on Sophocles – 1985).



Fig. 1 Aurel Stroe in his later years

His orchestral and instrumental works, which maximally honor the history of Romanian music, include: *Arcades* – 1962, Concert music for piano, 4 percussionists and 12 brass instruments – 1964, *Laudes I* and *II* for string instruments – 1966-68, *Canto I* and *II* – 1967-71, *Accords et comptines* – 1988, *Préludes lyriques* – 1999, *Mandala with a polyphony by Antonio Lotti* – 2000, but also the unknown masterpiece related to the mystical experience of the Burning Bush from the Antim Monastery in Bucharest – *Melodramas after The book of Job*.

In the area of chamber music, the three sonatas dedicated to the piano propose as many approaches to the reflection of non-musical phenomena in the sound language: Sonata No. 1 *Morphogenetica* – 1955, Sonata No. 2 *Thermodynamics* – 1983, Sonata No. 3 *In palimpsest* – 1992. The concertante creation revolutionizes the genre through the masterpiece from his early creation (Concerto for clarinet – 1976), but especially through the works of the last decade (*Capricci e Ragas*, concerto for violin and chamber orchestra – 1990; *Prairie, prières*, Sinfonia concertante for saxophone and orchestra – 1993; *Ciaccona con alcune licenze*, Sinfonia concertante for percussion and orchestra – 1995 and *Concerto for accordion and instrumental band* – 2001).

Despite of the fact that his musical creation has been investigated quite briefly thus far, beyond it there is a reservoir of musicological ideas of great depth and originality, perhaps as valuable as his sound art. This is our concern in this paper, since its sources are some of the most original and valuable concepts haloing music. Aurel Stroe is unique in the history of European art by duplicating a genius creation through an astonishing apparatus of thought on the musical phenomenon: a philosophical-mathematical excursion on the realities that are the basis of his musically articulated paths. Music always absorbed energies from beyond itself. In the wake of his music, much wider resorts must be sought, which engage the music in spheres far removed from its original context.

2. Stylistic dominants of Aurel Stroe's creation

Music recounts true world tragedies sonically, absorbing shockwaves into masterpieces that it transforms into significance. Our guide is his study from 1983: *Orestia, an essential reporting. The hidden side of Coephores*, from the “Secolul 20” magazine, no. 270-271. The paper offers some of the strategies with which the composer handled his musical material, in the conditions of an extreme semantic difficulty: that of the expressive stabilization of the work in the context of an imbalance offered by the coexistence of incommensurable elements.

2.a. Planetary folklore

In the first stage of his creation, he approached planetary folklore, through the

concern for simplifying sound systems, appeals to extra-European folklore sources (Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew), but also to Romanian carols, Byzantine melodies, Gregorian songs, attempting a fusion of sound materials. A final stage of a broad compositional vision in time, in the perspective of formalizing music based on multi-mobiles, on catalogs of various microstructures, towards that morphogenesis of major inner tension, with disrupting, surprising moments, is gradually found in the last concerts.²

The master attempted a return to simplicity, a rediscovery of the self, a search for the roots from which the existing musical system as a whole flourished: it is the call for the one who needs a foundation, who seeks stability in the innocence of early beginnings, the one who needs pure sparkle of the first sound structures.

2.b. Interdisciplinarity, probing boundaries

Aurel Stroe has brought together mathematics and logic, morphogenetic processes and the calculation of probabilities, giving great importance to musical tone. His very original style exploited unusual sonorities, mixing instruments in an unusual manner. He also explored the microtonal world (including the extra-European one) and the most diverse vocal techniques (from *Sprechstimme* to shouting).³

2.c. Morphogenetic music, disaggregation, rupture, anomaly, the irrecoverable

Many of the master's ideas of the master stand under this sign. The composer of

catastrophic ruptures, of inexorable disaggregation, nourished by the spirit of destruction, of structural anomalies, of the irreversible and the irretrievable as basic conditions of being, of reflecting on the principles of thermodynamics in closed systems, of states of continuous collapse by the openness to another world – with a different mentality⁴, Aurel Stroe did not only seek the linear illustration of the text in the musical score,

² Viorel Cosma, *Aurel Stroe*, in *Muzicieni din România. Lexicon* [Musicians from Romania. Lexicon], vol. 8, 2005.

³ Ruxandra Arzoiu, in *Grove's New Dictionary for Music and Musicians*, electronic edition, *Stroe, A.*

⁴ Aurel Stroe, *Orestia, o raportare esențială. Fața ascunsă a Coephorelor* [Orestia, an Essential Reporting. The Hidden Side of Coephores], "SECOLUL 20" magazine, no. 270-271, 6-7/1983, p. 25.

but also the access to the “deeper level of dramatic significance and musical structures”⁵.

All these have become elements responsible for the constitution of the tragic condition through

ruptures inside the being. The dramaturgical ruptures are reflected in music through fissures that grow irreversibly and produce severe disturbances in the musical composition, dislocations in the musical language. The music breaks under the pressure of the tragic text.⁶

The temporal breakage, the cleavage of sliding planes, the stylistic dislocations lead to the decrease of discursive coherence, to the increase of confusion, finally to the ontological catastrophe of the work.⁷

The decomposition of the work releases an energy and a psychological flow that makes it possible to embody it as a show.⁸

The fractured work embodies the destruction of a world.⁹

The morphogenetic music (born from the translation of the great mathematical theories of time into sound art), the composition with several tuning systems or within which immeasurable cultural dominants are confronted, give rise to a type of work of art that faces the same main difficulty as every creation of value: sustaining its unity (which inevitably, breaks down, endangering its very quality). This paper offers some of the strategies with which the composer handles his musical material, under the conditions of an extreme semantic difficulty: that of the expressive stabilization of the work in the context of an imbalance caused by the coexistence of incommensurable elements.

In this framework, other favorite topics are: the ontology of the work of art (and its sufferings in the modern context), the reflection of the theories of bifurcations, fractals and the chaos theory in sound art, the application of thermodynamic principles in the sound compositional space. The result of such strategies is dramatic, catastrophic, collapsing structures that propose unpredictable dynamics. A theoretician without equal, deeply knowledgeable of the great musical systems, he saw them as sound expressions with universal consequences, of great magnitude.

2.d. The ontology of the work of art

In this framework, other favorite topics are: the ontology of the work of art (and its sufferings in the modern context), the reflection of the theories of

⁵ Aurel Stroe, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁶ *Idem*, p. 26.

⁷ *Idem*, pp. 52-53.

⁸ *Idem*, p. 54.

⁹ *Idem*, p. 27.

bifurcations, fractals and the chaos theory in sound art, the application of thermodynamic principles in the sound compositional space. The result of such strategies is dramatic, catastrophic, collapsing structures that propose unpredictable dynamics. Being a theoretician by inner constitution (passionate of ideas), connoisseur of the great musical systems, he saw them as sonorous expressions with universal consequences, of great magnitude. In his music, not only systems were broken, but worlds, ontologies: his vision went far beyond the auditory one. Aurel Stroe's music built not only on the acoustic, sound level, but also on the "conceptual and especially ontological level"¹⁰. It was always about "understanding beauty and perceiving its significance"¹¹.

2.e. The multilayered (superpositional) complexity

Master of overlapping times, of incommensurable complexities on an acoustic (but also a conceptual) level, Aurel Stroe sought internal history (the becoming) beyond the seen, external history. "The composition with several tuning systems – seen as cultural paradigms¹² is another constant of his musical thinking and creation.

Aurel Stroe's work was inspired by avant-garde areas of contemporary thought. For the theory of morphogenetic music, which he conceived during his period in Germany, he relied on René Thom's theory of catastrophes. The composer always depended on his encyclopedic knowledge, of which all those who knew him speak (fed with intensive readings in mathematics, symbolic logic, thermodynamics, history of sciences, linguistics).¹³

2.f. The surrealist tragedy (the cult of paradox)

His music commenced from the adventure of creation, the discovery in itself of some fabulous sound scales, extracted and compiled from cultures other than the one to which it belonged, for reasons difficult to understand: why would one want, as a composer, to put one's work in the precarious (and tense!) situation of fracturing its unity through morphogenetic, catastrophic (in the mathematical sense) techniques, when its unity is a universal desideratum? Why seek ontological tension, difficult to manage both at the compositional and at the interpretive levels (and not just any kind of tension, but that between

¹⁰ Aurel Stroe, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹¹ Alain Danielou, *apud* Aurel Stroe, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

¹² Aurel Stroe, "433. Refugiu. Experimental" ["433. Refuge. Experimental"], 19 Martie 2008, retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20090210035258/http://www.433.ro/muzica/2008/03/19/aurel-stroe/>

¹³ Cf. Dan Dediu, *Aurel Stroe, muzicianul care vedea idei* [Aurel Stroe, The Musician Who Saw Ideas], "Evenimentul Zilei", 06 Octombrie 2008, retrieved from <https://evz.ro/aurel-stroe-muzicianul-care-vedea-idei-823405.html>

incommensurable elements, which have nothing to do with one another)? Why propose – in one’s own masterpieces – worlds that break and carry with them the tragedy of characters who have almost nothing to say to one another?

These great “why’s” write the story of the life and creation of the most original Romanian composer of the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the man who invested with properties specific to tragedy even his concerts or works without an operatic dominant. He always manifested a purely scenic vision, which was visible even in purely instrumental works – which would not normally entail it. For this reason, he had so much adherence to tragedy, and for the same reason, he looked through its grid at the discourse of many of his works, which preserve the dramaturgical structure of the fight between opposites. This over-complexification of his musical language – always superpositional, always involving the immeasurable called for an impossible dialogue! – is merely his way of seeking to create and sustain the tragic inner tension of surrealist origin. This is the portrait of today’s world...

3. Conclusions

Aurel Stroe’s music (especially music from the last period, in which the Concert for accordion and instrumental band draws a symbol difficult to decipher) is best represented by the melody that moves towards the highest register at the end of the concert dedicated to the saxophone, a melody that rises towards unmatched rarefactions, breaking from itself a remnant, then a last remnant ... A man who was capable of synthesizing in his music the finest essences, Aurel Stroe was the only one of his generation who placed the ideas of Parmenides and Don Scotus together, the great and small infinity, the most advanced mathematics and Rene Guenon’s concepts, frozen time and the eternity of Epiphanies (from *Ciaccona con alcune licenze*), mathematically argued fractals and catastrophes. Having a deep understanding of the great musical systems, he saw them as sound expressions with universal consequences of great magnitude.

He was a thorough thinker who found his arguments in the most distant epistemological premises of art. The composer Dan Dediú said of the master:

in my opinion, Aurel Stroe was a brilliant personality. Both his music and his theoretical ideas have influenced many musicians from Romania and abroad. Personally, I was especially attracted by his clear manner of thinking and by the musical paradoxes to which he gave rise. As Camil Petrescu said, «this man saw ideas».¹⁴

¹⁴ Dan Dediú, *op. cit.*

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