

## Emilia Petrescu – The Outstanding Performer of the Baroque Cantata

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**Abstract:** This year marks two decades since the passing away of the distinguished performer and singing teacher Emilia Petrescu, a symbol of the generation of singers from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a refined artist who has always been remembered for her unique interpretive versions of various lied, oratorio and cantata opuses. Her fascinating and solid musical culture, her rigorous singing technique or her search for original vocal approaches to the scores that she performed are just some of the basic components of the purity of her interpretive style, which deserves to be commented on based on some famous performances. Being highly appreciated by critics and having built a remarkable career both in Romania and abroad, the soprano Emilia Petrescu is the role model of any vocation artist who dedicated herself to both performing and teaching. Starting from Grigore Constantinescu’s monograph (*Emilia Petrescu-The Queen of Classical Singing in Concert*), as well as various articles on her artistic activity, we will focus on analysing certain excerpts from several cantatas with a view to highlighting the singer’s unique manner of performing baroque works.

**Keywords:** soprano, lied, oratorio, cantata, singing technique, performing stylistics.

### 1. Introduction

The intention of drawing a musicological portrait, of evoking the personality of any artist, implies, in a first stage, that the author documents the reception of the musician; they find, not infrequently, a lack of information from relevant sources (monographs, studies, articles), memoir pages, chronicles, interviews, recordings, which would contribute to the faithful reconstruction of a destiny dedicated to sound art. The more challenged the signatory becomes, when she discovers that the topic proposed has previously benefited from an extensive research – which

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implies a revaluation, a rethinking of the portrait genre, in the sense of problematizing a facet of the scientific approach in order to achieve a concrete result, by which to demonstrate the functionality of the debated ideas. We hereby refer to the monograph *Emilia Petrescu – the queen of classical singing in concert* by Grigore Constantinescu, published by the Musical Publishing House 11 years after the performer's passing away, “a sober and restrained lady in her reactions... bringing together intelligence, talent and study under the arch of will, interest for knowledge, performance and discipline”.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Emilia Petrescu. A portrait

Emilia Petrescu was born in Bucharest in 1925. After graduating from the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, the Royal Academy of Music and Dramatic Art in the capital, she listened to the advice of prestigious musicians (composer Dumitru D. Botez, tenor Aurel Alexandrescu and conductor Constantin Silvestri), who persuaded her that her voice is better suited for chamber and vocal-symphonic repertoires. An essential decision, which determined her to specialize in the aforementioned directions, followed by an impressive career in Europe and the United States of America. She was an artist who stood out in the musical landscape of Bucharest in a double capacity: as a soloist at the Romanian Athenaeum, Philharmonic, Romanian Radio and as a teacher of lied and oratorio at the National University of Music. Perseverance in the study of vocal art, curiosity to discover new scores, collaboration with valuable performers (Dietrich Fischer Dieskau, Peter Schreier, Pierre Boulez, George Georgescu) paved the way to invitations to participate as a soloist in numerous tours organized by outstanding institutions or as a member of the jury in important competitions. She was admired for her exceptional qualities, sensitivity, nobility, rigor, but above all for her crystal-like and malleable voice which adapted to the vast repertoire of her performances, from old to contemporary Romanian music.

Delving into well-known but also unknown works in the baroque and classical styles, she offered unique performances of genres such as lied, oratorio, cantata, requiem, in which she was concerned with the accuracy of the vocal lines, relying on a solidly built singing technique. A nationally and internationally recognized artist, to whom, as a sign of appreciation, the University of Göttingen awarded the Golden Duchy (1969); the *Heinrich Schütz* Society (1970), *Lüdenscheid Early Music Festival* (1971) and

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<sup>2</sup> Grigore Constantinescu (2014), *Emilia Petrescu – regina cântului vocal concertant* [Emilia Petrescu –The Queen of Classical Singing in Concert], Editura Muzicală, București, p. 11.

Baldwin Wallace University Cleveland, USA, (1974), awarded her the title of Honorary Member. In 2003, Emilia Petrescu died at Pasărea Monastery, near Bucharest.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. *Emilia Petrescu – queen of classical concert singing by Grigore Constantinescu. Fundamental monographic research*

In the following, we will mention some of the ideas discussed at length by the musicologist Grigore Constantinescu in the cited book, a monographic research of encyclopedic quality (434 pages) that includes 13 chapters, where the portrait of the artist is outlined from multiple perspectives: the performer's career perceived by soloists and critics from the national or international sphere, in different stages of supporting vocal-symphonic recitals or concerts (1945-1995) in chronological order; the reception of the musician from comments, publicity, press information, revealed in a stylistic ordering of the creators approached, with the related opposites; bringing to light some known ideas partly related to the assertion as a soloist in various opera performances, from *L'Orfeo, favola in musica* by Claudio Monteverdi, to *Tristan und Isolde* by Richard Wagner; the pedagogical contribution understood from the analysis of the performer's vocality, applied in the genres of lied or oratorio and highlighted by the musician's notes in the manuscript about the singing technique, the study of ornamentation and improvisation in baroque style; her experience as a demanding mentor, captured on the one hand, in the pages of an interview with soprano Bianca Manoleanu, a faithful disciple, and on the other hand, from the correspondence with performers, conductors, composers or family members during the year 1984-1985, when she acted as a guest professor providing master classes and vocal education at the Ankara Opera.

The profile of the musician deepens with what we learn from the texts published by critics in various cultural and musical magazines, conversations, radio shows about the repertoires addressed, the tours made (in Germany - Dresden, Leipzig, Zwickau, Berlin, Köln, Kassel), the emotional comments of the musician, which reflect her attachment to the Bach choir (Sibiu), to the pertinent opinions about the current opera theater, etc. Of a rare sensitivity are the pages entitled *Memories... Those around Emilia*, which reveal the feedback of the Romanian musicians with whom she collaborated: **performers** (bass Ionel Pantea; bass-baritone Gheorghe Crăsnaru; bass Pompei Hărășteanu, tenor Florin Diaconescu; sopranos Georgeta Popa Pinghireac; Sanda Șandru; tenor Ion Piso; pianist Valentin

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<sup>3</sup> As per <https://www.casedemuzicieni.ro/emilia-petrescu/>, viewed on 28.10.2023.

Gheorghiu; conductors Carol Litvin; Ludovic Bacs; Ilarion Ionescu-Galați) **composers** (Nicolae Coman, Pascal Bentoiu, Doru Popovici); **musicologists** (Ada Brumaru; Viorel Cosma; Dumitru Avakian; Olguța Grigorescu; Luminița Vartolomei; Elena Zottoviceanu). The content of the last chapter, *Testamentary legacies. Interpretive creation on record*, from Golden Audio Library of the Romanian Broadcasting Company is particularly important for its documentary value. From it, along with the cataloging of some records and tapes recorded in Romania, we also learn about the existence of audio documents at the Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum in Salzburg.

### 2.1. Emilia Petrescu – a culturally open performer

Starting from her serious training as a philosopher-musician, and, above all, from the ideas extracted from the content of manuscripts, most of them undated and published by Grigore Constantinescu in the monograph (chapter V, *Ideas and contributions in singing pedagogy*) about the deepening of the baroque style, by comparing some treatises from different schools (German, French, Italian), focused on specific problems related to ornaments, cadences, improvisations, we will try in the following examples to make analytical comments on the relationship between the theoretical knowledge assimilated, the different ways of applying it in the interpretive versions of some lesser-known works and the enthusiastic reception of specialised criticism.

### 3. Georg Friedrich Haendel. The Italian cantata *Lucrezia*

One of the musical genres in which the soprano excelled was the cantata, as evidenced by the numerous recordings of Baroque works, contributing through study and dedication to crafting her own performance style, admired among others by the German musicologist and conductor Konrad Ameln, president of the *Heinrich Schütz* Society, who invited the soprano to participate in the *Göttinger Handel Fest*, 1967. Let's not forget that only a year earlier (1966), Emilia Petrescu made her debut in Halle with a recital, as part of the *International Handel Festival*. In one of the interviews given to Despina Petecel Theodoru, the artist recounted "... I presented myself with the cantata *Lucrezia* by Handel, one of the most difficult vocal symphonic works over the centuries... it had never been sung in its entirety... because one of the arias is extremely difficult and has a *Furioso* almost impossible to achieve. It took me two years to perform that

half-page moment. It's a dizzying speed, executed with a breath as ample as possible"<sup>4</sup>

The Italian cantata *Lucrezia (O numi eterni)*, after the opening verse of the first recitative), 1706, for soprano and harpsichord (known in various arrangements and transcriptions), stands out from the approximately 100 works of the genre by its deep dramatic character, inferred from the tense content of the subject. Written by Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili, the libretto focuses on the inner turmoil faced by Rome's legendary heroine, Lucretia, after being humiliated by the son of an Etruscan king, an act that leads her to commit suicide. She implores the gods to unleash merciless vengeance on both the king and his son, whom she detests. The ending is revealed as a contemplation of her impending death. Beyond the content of the subject imbued with extreme violence, but whose consequences have historical significance, marking a change in the form of government, from monarchy to republic, the musical value of the score stands out, noted among others by the German composer and theorist Johann Mattheson. In the volume *Grosse Generalbaß-Schule*<sup>5</sup> (1731), he appreciated the novelty of the modulations, the virtuosity, the elaborate contrapuntal writing and the contrast of the seven sections, which, although built in the traditional sequence (*recitative-aria-recitative-arioso-final scene*), are identified by – a particular sound ambience.

### 3.1. The climax *Furioso (Lucrezia)*

Returning to the musician's notes from the *Study of Ornamentation and Improvisation in the Baroque Style*, extracted from the speech given at the Kassel Symposium in October 1971, we find that Emilia Petrescu, relying on the ideas from the treatise of the pedagogue Ludovico Zacconi (1555-1627), *Prattica di Musica* (1592-1622), the chapter *Contrapunto alla mente*, focused on the organization of principles of improvisation and ornamentation, mentions, among other fragments of baroque opuses, the *Furioso* moment, in which, “in order to illustrate the drama, the voice is compelled to execute an extremely fast coloratura for medium voice, with leaps, in one breath”<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Despina Petecel-Theodoru (1995), *Soprano Emilia Petrescu*, interview in vol. *Muzicienii noștri se destăinuie*, II [Our Musicians confess, Vol. II], Editura Muzicală, București, pp. 231-232.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Mattheson (1731/2010), *Grosse General-Bass-Schule, oder, Der exemplarischen Organisten-Probe: bestehend in dreien Klassen, als: in einer gründlichen Vorbereitung, in 24 leichten Exempeln, in 24 schwerern Prob-Stücken*, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, electronic version, 23 June.

<sup>6</sup> According to Gîgore Constantinescu (2014). *op. cit.*, pp. 185-186.

Fig. 1 G. Fr. Haendel, *Cantata italiană Lucrezia*, Recitativo “Ah! che ancor”/’Furioso’, ms. 1-27

The collaboration with the aforementioned performers in order to make the record at Electrecord in 1966 also prompted an invitation from *Barereiter Musicaphon*, who in the January 1969 *Fono forum* publication about the new recording, *Italiansche Kantaten*, commented: “the explosive cadence of the two furioso passages is almost surreal – evidence of physical strength and maximum concentration, as well as the alternation of emotional and alert passages respectively... Emilia Petrescu demonstrates that virtuosic technique can be a quality in the original sense of the word...”<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4. Giovanni Battista Pergolesi. *Cantata Orfeo*

Another lesser-known work in the late Baroque cantata repertoire is Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's *Orfeo* (1736–1738), composed for soprano, flute, violin, viola and harpsichord. Although it has a structure common to the cantatas of this period – recitative-aria (Amoroso)-recitative-aria Presto, there is an obvious difference from the contemporary creator Alessandro Scarlatti, but a closeness in the construction of melodic progression to Antonio Vivaldi. Strongly influenced by the composition technique of the opera, where the *secco* recitative oscillates with the *accompagnato*, the instruments contribute to highlighting the details of the text, the phrases are amplified, the ornamentation is diversified, the accompaniment acquires a

<sup>7</sup> Grigore Constantinescu (2014). *op. cit.*, p. 94.

novel, almost orchestral function. There are several features that bring the opus closer to the stage.

#### 4.1. Aria *Euridice e dove sei (cantata Orfeo)*. Technical challenges

In the musician's systematized vision, which analyzed the contributions of pedagogues, theorists, performers, creators from different historical-stylistic stages (Hieronymus de Moravia, Konrad von Zabern, Pier Francesco Tosi, Johann Friederich Agricola), the more significant technical problems of the *Euridice e dove sei (Amoroso)* aria, include the intonation support in all registers with their natural equalization, the *non-vibrato* emission, maintained at the same intensity even in moments of dramatic character, the rendering of the vocalizations in a single breath, but especially the realization of the trill, which “must be equally measured”<sup>8</sup>, in order to create the possibility to hear “the distinct notes in that interval”<sup>9</sup>... One of the existing indications in the score is *facile e moderatamente veloce*, which “makes us think that it is performed less often compared to mordant. Obviously, for the inclusion of the trill in other forms of ornamentation, from which interval jumps are not missing, vocal agility becomes a primordial condition”<sup>10</sup>.




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<sup>8</sup> Grigore Constantinescu (2014). *op. cit.*, p. 177, *apud* Cristina Radu-Giurgiu, *An exceptional meeting at the Black Church: Emilia Petrescu and Hans Eckart Schlandt*, “Bulletin of the Transylvania University of Brasov”, Special Issue, Series VIII: Performing Arts – Vol.12 (61) nr. 2 – 2019, [http://webbut.unitbv.ro/Bulletin/Series%20VIII/2020/17\\_RADU-cristina.pdf](http://webbut.unitbv.ro/Bulletin/Series%20VIII/2020/17_RADU-cristina.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> Grigore Constantinescu, *op. cit.*, p. 177.



Fig.2 Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, cantata *Orfeo*,  
fragment from *Euridice e dove sei (Amoroso)*, ms. 1-15

Listening to different recordings with score, of the previously mentioned musical fragments, the question comes up: how did Emilia Petrescu manage to integrate those principles extracted from the writings and treatises of the 13<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries in a balanced manner, finding the middle ground between the conceptions of theorists from various cultures and the different, dynamic perception on the rendering of the artistic act of the second half of the last century?

Following the review of Grigore Constantinescu's monograph, the interview from the volume *Our Musicians confess* and some recently posted articles, in parallel with the audition and commentary of works from the baroque repertoire in the cantata genre, I have synthesized several ideas.

## 5. Classification of research. Reflections on a personality

In the course of her extensive career dedicated to the stage and the teaching activity, the musician constantly showed an attitude of respect towards the masters who contributed to her artistic training, as evidenced by the evocation of the personalities who channeled her destiny. Although she was not endowed with an ample voice, the intense technical study, which did not lack the creativity of some exercises designed to amplify support and vocal capacity, equalizing the sonority of the registers, obtaining a typology of non-vibrato sound, creating vocalizations adapted to the style and to the opus approach – all these favored the longevity of her career, during which, along with her preference for the genres of lied



or vocal-symphonic, was also manifested in interpreting certain scores from the repertoire of lyrical theater.

The rigor demonstrated by the artistic activity had an impact on the teaching, as well. It is enough to recall the idea extracted from the chronicle signed by Carmen Stoianov <sup>11</sup> about the recital given in April 1985 by performers Remus and Bianca Manoleanu, where the author mentioned the soprano's stage of specialization in the art of singing at the Conservatory with maestro Emilia Petrescu, who trained her for four years from a technical point of view, not being allowed to evolve on stage.

It is worth noting that the serious technical voice training was followed by the long study of scores in all aspects, often under the guidance of prestigious conductors, with focus on the messages extracted from the inspirational texts, on the multiple correspondences between the poetic and the musical phrases. The courage to perform works in the first audition, the music of which remained unknown due to technical difficulties, determined the circulation of challenging works signed by Heinrich Schütz, Dietrich Buxtehude, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Antonio Vivaldi, the artist contributing to the creation of an image real of the baroque style.

## 6. Conclusions

It is worth noting that the distinguished performances of the excerpts from cantatas *Lucrezia* (Georg Friedrich Haendel) and *Orfeo* (Giovanni Battista Pergolesi) are explained by the musician's inclination towards deepening the Baroque style from a scientific perspective, as evidenced by the manuscripts dealing with ornamentation or the peculiarities of vocal technique, texts that deserve to be read and understood by any soloist interested in offering a sound variant appropriate to this historical stage.

Therefore, in the present study I wanted to draw the attention of performers to the prominent musician Emilia Petrescu, who unraveled the mystery of the *graceful transfer of that museum of baroque knowledge*, in a polished sonority, with the wisdom and patience of an ascetic.

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