

Myriam Marbé – Avant-garde and Ideological Neutrality

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Abstract: Myriam Marbé (1931-1997) was part of the *Golden Generation* of Romanian composers, involved in developing the technique of composition following the model of the European avant-garde. This objective was at odds with the aesthetic of socialist realism officially promoted in the 1950s and 1960s. The composer managed to avoid political conformism due to her style, in which she combines innovative language with musical and spiritual sources of Romanian folklore. The artist's creative prestige reached a first climax with the famous work *Ritual for the thirst of the earth* (1968). The interest in capitalizing on ancient forms of expression can also be seen in the work for children's choir and orchestra, *Chiuituri* (1978). The *chiuituri* express irrepressible joy, jubilation, but also a type of folkloric manifestation that is specifically Romanian. Myriam Marbé creates an imaginary place of the joy of living. In the article dedicated to this work, Thomas Beimel depicts the Romanian political context of the late '70s in detail. “There are hardly any reasons for such jubilation as expressed in *Chiuituri*, during the Romanian dictatorship, beyond propaganda formats. The piece is very suitable to illustrate the aesthetic freedoms possible during this regime” Another work by the composer, *Des-Cântec* (1985), presents a study of melody and its possible functions. The creation refers to two different designs: a Delphic hymn and a quote from a work by Johann Sebastian Bach. *The Delphic hymn* is articulated in a contemporary manner, while *Bach's fragment* changes character and appears in the manner of a doina. Myriam Marbé was not concerned with quotes, but with working with songs of different registers and origins that are in a process of permanent metamorphosis.

Keywords: The Golden Generation, avant-garde, Myriam Marbé, wind quintet, Romanian folklore.

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1. Introduction: Historical background

By initiating approaches to relate Romanian musical life to that of the European countries, the young generation of composers established around 1960 has definitely stimulated the creative evolution, along with the fields of pedagogy, theory, ethnomusicology, music criticism and aesthetics. The originality of modern creation results from adapting new composition techniques promoted by the European avant-garde to the archaic background of Romanian traditions, the folkloric vein becoming a valid and valuable source of inspiration.

Myriam Marbé was a prominent figure of the first generation of modern composers. Her compositional style, which integrates old musical sources, including folklore, is expressed in a language highly evolved in terms of the general options of the Romanian composers' society at that time. Developing an interest in the new way of expression and writing offered by improvisational styles, in the controlled freedom practiced in the West, associated with Romanian subjects gave her an ideological neutrality.

The gap between the value of Myriam Marbé's compositional work and its relatively modest reflection in current musicological writings was the first impetus in initiating research on the author's works.

2. Brief portrait of composer Myriam Marbé

2.1. Formative years

An essential stage in the formation of Myriam Marbé was the period of her studies at the Conservatory of Music in Bucharest, where she had the privilege, between 1944 and 1954, to have the guidance of Mihail Jora (an outstanding Romanian musician who did not conform to the rigid patterns of the communist regime's ideology), Leon Klepper and Mihail Andricu. The latter is recognized for the decisive role he played in shaping an entire generation of composers known today as the "Golden Generation", Myriam Marbé being part of this elite group. About **Mihail Andricu**, the artist stated that "He actually facilitated our contact with modern music, but also with what created our openness to modern music. As is known, he had an impressive record collection and we could listen, for instance, to the complete works of Webern at his place"².

The gradual familiarity with **modern and avant-garde trends** was thus achieved "quasi-clandestinely" at Jora's place, at Aurel Stroe's, at Mihail Andricu's. The composer remembers that "we used to meet at Aurel

² Laura Manolache (2002), *Şase portrete de compozitori români* [Six portraits of Romanian composers], Editura Muzicală, Bucureşti, p. 98.

Stroe's and read Leibowitz's book about Schönberg's technique³ and others, in a closed circle. At master Andricu's we used to meet without hiding, but this became a head of accusation against him; he was - like other intellectuals – judged, mocked, isolated, he became *persona non grata*..."⁴.

Interest in **new music** also materialized in musicology studies, through the analysis of the *String Quartet no. 2* by George Enescu, work published in 1961, with linguistic and terminological precautions necessary to avoid censorship.

1988 marked a peak in the musical activity of composer Myriam Marbé, who was awarded a creative grant by the city of **Mannheim**. Among the many distinctions obtained by the composer over the years, we mention the Second Prize (1966), the First Prize (1976) in the International Composition Competition of the GEDOK-Mannheim Association, along with the U.C.M.R. award (won in 1971, 1974, 1980, 1982), the Bernier Prize of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in **Paris** (1972) and the prize of the Romanian Academy (1977)⁵.

Regarding her political orientations, the artist belongs to the category of composers who refused to join the Communist Party. Under these circumstances, although one of the most important composers of her time, Myriam Marbé's exposure to the musical landscape was obviously limited. Fortunately, however, between 1968 and 1972, the composer was allowed to attend the summer courses in **Darmstadt**⁶, an iconic place for the **avant-garde of European music** in the second half of the last century.

2.2. The evolution of Myriam Marbé's creation

The author's preference for the use of **voice** in composition reflects her sensitivity for **poetry** and the feeling that the expression of one's voice is something authentic (a very old way of rendering).

She also wrote a study about Arghezi poetry, confessing that the starting point in creating a lied inspired by Tudor Arghezi was the lied *Cântecul din fluier* by Jora. Evoking a particularly innovative work of the genre, *Vocabulary I* (1974), we note that the voice is joined by **prepared percussion instruments**, clarinet and piano⁷.

³ The composer refers to one of Leibowitz's reference books, *Schoenberg et son école: l'étape contemporaine du langage musical*, published in Paris, in 1947 or to *Introduction à la musique de douze sons. Les variations pour orchestre op. 31*, by Arnold Schoenberg, published in 1949, Paris.

⁴ Laura Manolache, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁵ Valentina Sandu-Dediu (2002), *Muzica românească între 1944-2000* [Romanian music between 1944 and 2000], Editura Muzicală, București, p. 244.

⁶ <https://continuo.wordpress.com/2008/10/20/myriam-marbe-serenataconcertotime-found-again/>, viewed on 2.01.2023.

⁷ Valentina Sandu-Dediu, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

By recalling the fact that in her youth she used compositional practices and techniques of serialism, in her interview with Laura Manolache, Myriam Marbé mentions the search for a compositional system that would give her the appropriate **rigor** and **framework** to express her musical intuition, recalling, in this regard, *Sonata for solo clarinet* from 1964 and *Sonata for two violas*, 1965. The author's opinion at the time of the interview is related to the limit of any system and the joy she feels when listening to the works of her youth, that seem to convey an emotion, an expression enchantment beyond everyday life. The author equally values what the performer can offer her in the execution of the work.

The requests from performers, the commissions received were considered **stimulating** because “they compel you to renew yourself conceptually and stylistically”⁸.

The use of the **words** and the **musicality** of the text in the *Ritual for the Thirst of the Earth* arose from laborious searches to accommodate the system with the desired expression. **Ritual elements** find their place in the creation of the composer, highlighting the evocation of **mourning**, in *Sonata per due*, alongside the rituals of pagan origin (or the songs to summon the rain), in *Ritual for the thirst of the earth*.

The musical configuration of the idea of hope, of optimism, atmosphere considered to be pervasive in a great part of the artist's works, represents an essential stylistic imprint of Myriam Marbé's creation. *Ritual for the Thirst of the Earth* (1985) begins, paradoxically, with an image of irreversible death.

In one of the composer's conversations with Laura Manolache, Myriam Marbé reveals to the audience an aspect relevant to the entire course of her creation, namely that her music “leads to a transcendence, to a plenary feeling, to an openness to the absolute”⁹. Thus, her ritual revolves around the presence of a superior creative principle and symbolic elements, the integration of suggestive passages being relevant in this respect: “clean rain, from the Lord given”, “cross-trinity”, “bread of the Sun, bread of Easter”.

In the choral piece *Ritual for the Thirst of the Earth*, a closeness to **archaic folk song** texts is adopted. However, the lyrics do not support an actual melody, but rather contribute to shaping a musical expression, complemented by the sonority of the words.

Ritual for the Thirst of the Earth has, following the author's descriptions of form, architecture and musical dramaturgy – a general pre-set arch form, slightly distorted, to reach the climax in the golden section.

⁸ Valentina Sandu-Dediu, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁹ Laura Manolache, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

Another peculiarity of the composer's own artistic conception is, in many cases, **discarding the final bar from the score**. The final double bar would mark, through a simple musical notation, an impediment to the human aspiration towards the absolute¹⁰, and thus Myriam Marbé prefers to abandon this graphic symbol in many of her works, leaving a whole field of meanings open to the audience and performer alike.

Since then, I have not been able to put a double bar at the end of my works. I have the feeling that – however modest it may be – my creation is but a small outcome of a higher Creative Principle. Each work would be but a first step from the human to that absolute which I pay homage to – and I dare not interrupt the string of future virtual steps through the barrier of a final double bar.¹¹

Remembering the time when she was concerned with organizing **the chromatic total** (the 60s), the composer noticed similar techniques in the works of Enescu and Webern. The **Enescian model**, including intonational structuring by dosing the chromatic total, meant a lot to the generation of which Myriam Marbé was a part.

Marbé offered an insight into her way of thinking. The *Sonata for Two Violas*, for example, is mainly concerned with *time* and the **overlapping of several temporal developments in a new type of polyphony**. Polyphony “represents the art of dynamic structuring according to the unequal interventions of voices. (...) The voices “enter a musical discourse as a theatre play with intentions, with claims to dominate, with interruptions, with claims, with disappearances, with attempts to collaborate”¹².

The desire of the artist was to create **free expression** through a rigorous technique, as happens in the second part of the *Sonata for two violas*, called *Song*, which is thought of as a **fugue**, but suggests a long, drawn-out song (**doina**).

2.3. Stylistic highlights of Myriam Marbé's works

The artist's works could be framed in the **lyrical-contemplative trend** of Romanian creation (according to Corneliu Dan Georgescu's classification), by integrating **metamusical** meanings. One of the distinguishing elements of her compositional style brings to attention the reflective tone, the sonic meditations on themes of great importance, such as life or death.

¹⁰ Laura Manolache, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 95.

¹² *Idem*, p. 109.

On the other hand, significant in terms of her creation is the fact that, despite the problems addressed, the atmosphere created by her works is a positive one, suggesting a state of serenity, of liberation. It can thus be considered that Myriam Marbé's music reveals an essential feature of the Christian spirit, namely hope.

As musicologist Irinel Anghel mentions in his book *Orientations, directions, trends of Romanian music in the second half of the twentieth century*, Myriam Marbé adopts the intertwining of archetypes of an ancient Byzantine language with that specific to the twentieth century. An idea in perfect harmony is formulated by Thomas Beimel, who defines the composer's creation as “a rich music, nourished by many traditions”.

3. Overview of several works

3.1. *Chiuituri* – for children's choir and orchestra (1978)

In 1978, composer Myriam Marbé wrote *Chiuituri*, a work for children's choir and orchestra. The **chiuituri** are the expression of irrepressible joy – shouting with joy, jubilating, cheering – but also a form of folkloric manifestation that is specifically Romanian. Myriam Marbé creates a free space where children and adults meet to be “crazy” for once: an imaginary place of the joy of living.

The composition *Chiuituri* by Myriam Marbé premiered on April 24th, 1978 at the opening concert of the 100th anniversary of the Braşov Philharmonic. For Marbé's piece, the orchestra was joined by the *Camerata infantis* children's choir from Braşov, conducted by Nicolae Bica.

In the article dedicated to the work, Thomas Beimel researches and presents details of the Romanian political context from the late 70s:

There are hardly any reasons for such jubilation expressed in *Chiuituri* during the Romanian communist regime. And there are certainly no public forums to express it, beyond propagandistic formats. The piece is unique within Marbé's oeuvre. And it is very suitable to illustrate the aesthetic freedoms that were possible under the Romanian dictatorship.

The genesis of the work can be found in a text from the program booklet of the Braşov Philharmonic.:




Some time ago, when I read Virgil Medan's book *O mie de chiuituri de pe râul Someş* [A Thousand *chiuituri* on the Someş River], it was still not clear to me how I could combine his obvious and flourishing plasticity with music. The time has come for such a transcription: on the occasion of the centenary celebration to which the *Camerata infantis* children's choir, conducted by Nicolae Bica, was

invited. I chose those *chiuituri* that fit well with children's diction and song. Others I chose because of the sonority of words like “nu te lele bozomi la curaua cu bumbii” and which, in the musical context of the cantata, take on the appearance of children's play without losing their original satirical character. But the joke and the play are framed by lyrics whose subtler meaning resulted in a poetic musical rendering.

Chiuituri, verses addressed in an ingenious language, are chanted rhythmically. Sometimes the performers are given specific instructions about the movements they must make. But for Myriam Marbé they mean even more: she is concerned with an aesthetic game that, as in most of her works, captures the composition in the form of a process of abstraction. That's why she also proposes a German title: *Skandierte Rufe* [**Chanted shouts**] to highlight the transcendence of the original context of traditional music.

Among the instruments observed in the orchestral composition, there are the following: flute, clarinet in Sib, horn, trumpet, harp, vibraphone, whip, cymbals, bells, tam-tam, timpani, woodblock, violin, viola, cello, double bass.

An extremely rich work in terms of **sound effects**, it stands out for its use both in vocal moments and instrumental sections, integrating: claps, kicks, finger pops, improvisation, glissando, approximate heights. Along with the mentioned elements, authentic sonorities produced by whips, bells (which recreate, audibly, the sound made by church bells) are highlighted, but also original ways of approaching wind instruments, through the author's instructions to “unfold the flute” and “remount the flute”. The following examples illustrate the concentration of several sound effects and particular notation marks.

	hand clap
	foot tap
	finger snap



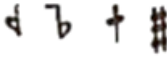
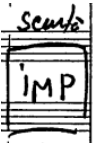

	approximate heights
	irregular succession of very high-pitched sounds
	untempered signs
	short improvisation
	breath

Chart 1 Notation marks used by Myriam Marbé in the score

3.2. *Des-cântec* – for wind quintet (1985)

In her article, *George Enesco, notre contemporain*, Myriam Marbé talks about the possibility of different musical languages coexisting, the result of her reflections on the work of the great maestro.

Explicitly, *Des-Cântec [Dis-enchantment]* is a study of melody and its possible functions. The work refers to two different models, while also providing some clues as to their origin: a Delphic hymn and a quote from a work by Johann Sebastian Bach. However, the sources are not mentioned. Instead, the composer states that, to begin with, she does not use the melodies in their original form: according to her, the Delphic hymn is articulated in a contemporary manner, while the Bach fragment changes character and appears in a *doina*¹³. This clearly shows that Myriam Marbé

¹³ Thomas Beimel (2015), *Die Geburt eines neuen Melos* [The birth of a new Melos] in “Musicology Today”, no. 21, p. 6.

is not concerned with quotations, but with working with songs of different accounts and origins that are in a process of permanent metamorphosis. In the first section after the introduction, fast moving melodic textures predominate.

The initial instrumental composition is represented by the five wind instruments of the quintet, as follows: flute, oboe, clarinet in Bb, bassoon and horn. Along the way, each category uses several types of the same instrument, such as the *hecklephone* – an instrument similar to the bass oboe (the oboe being replaced by this instrument over a significant stretch of time), piccolo clarinet in Eb, clarinet in A, bass clarinet in Bb, contrabassoon, piccolo flute, alto flute.

The introductory fragment outlines **2 well-distinguished motifs**: a diatonic motif (on **the oboe**), and a chromatic motif, with oscillations of seconds in the low register (on **the bassoon**), presented as starting points for the subsequent rhythmic-melodic material.

The composer's notes indicate, in a first stage, certain moments of synchronization to which are added - in the score - mentions such as: “slightly moving, but always mobile”.

Another melodic line is sung – in the low register, in the form of a pedal – which receives a response from the flute. This melodic line is based on thirds and fourths, gradually making a transition to polyphonic writing, which has complementarity as an essential element (up to mark 9). Thus, the horn, the flute and the clarinet in Bb intervene in turn. The **contrasting moment** is highlighted not only by sound effects, but also by **strong dynamic differences**. We notice the notation of the rhythm in measure at this stage, the author mentioning: *Mettre en évidence la symétrie rythmique!* Quasi-recitative formulas are added (to **the horn** – mark 7) in gradual densification, later, with gradual thinning of the emission speed.

Starting with mark 9, **the improvisational part** makes its presence felt, noting the *dispersal* of the bar, later the improvisational fragments being alternated with the measured ones.

The author's notes on this fragment indicate “rigorous, not relaxed”:

At this stage, the score is an outline for the concert improvisation, with only the basic points of intonation highlighted. These “garlands”, as Myriam Marbé calls them, form a chromatic amalgam, but retain in their microstructure interval movements typical of **ancient Greek hymns**. However, it is not known whether the long, sustained notes in the background represent a possible derivation from Bach's music.

It is not possible to determine, in this situation, what is original and what is adaptation. Moreover, one can note an inner dynamic characteristic of Myriam Marbé's music: the **fugue textures**, however discrete and accidental they may seem, always have great potential in terms of their

theatrical function. Because each element can suddenly come to the fore and become perceptible as a melody, Myriam Marbé works deliberately with abstraction¹⁴.

The melodic fragments projected against the background of a moving sound surface, like a screen, often have an undefined outline. Microtonal inflections ensure a smooth transition from the **sound texture to the melodic fragment**. The processes of filtering the original material also led to a purification of the melodic gestures that sometimes appear without intonation: like a rhythmic gesture that only suggests a melodic structure. In search of an appropriate expression, any instrumental act could provide an impetus for the beginning of a song.

However, Myriam Marbé is not only looking for the possible **manifestations of the melody**, but also its potential **function**. It is important that towards the end of a section, the various instruments try a constant interplay to give continuity to the beginnings of the melody.

This long final section looks for strategies to unite the various instrumental voices in **unison**. In particular, after a choral passage that Myriam Marbé deliberately calls “cloches” (bells) and which, in her music, is always an indicator of the opening of the musical discourse in the direction of transcendence.

The fact that the author uses *alto flute* in her work is a rarer choice. Most of the work opts for a **free rhythmic writing** out of measure, with a lot of sound effects, improvisation, and with inserts of calculated/metrically notated moments. The interpretation of her creation is, moreover, supported by the “Concordia” Brass Quintet, made up, at that time, of Ioan Cațianis, Vasile Niculae, Florian Popa, Ion Rațiu and Miltiade Nenoiu.

4. Conclusions

Myriam Marbé (1931-1997) was part of the Golden Generation of Romanian composers, involved in the development of compositional technique along the lines of the European avant-garde. This objective – in contradiction to the aesthetics of socialist realism officially promoted in the 1950s and 1960s. The composer managed to avoid political conformism because of to her unique style, in which she combines an innovative language with musical and spiritual sources of Romanian folklore. She remained constant in her detachment from the world of politics, refusing to become a member of the Romanian Communist Party, unlike most of her colleagues.

¹⁴ Thomas Beimel, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

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