

Romanian symphonic poems from the first half of the 20th century: *Marsyas* and *Acteon*

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Abstract: The history of Romanian music at the beginning of the 20th century was marked by the efforts of composers to offer valuable local creations in terms of content that were fully in line with European ones. The analysis of the two symphonic poems aims to highlight their formal principles and the way in which the subject dictates the sound architecture or vice versa. At the same time, by researching these works, it will be highlighted that in the Romanian musical space of the first half of the 20th century, the language used is as complex as that of contemporary works in Western Europe.

Keywords: *Marsyas*, *Acteon*, symphonic poem, Alfred Alessandrescu, Alfonso Castaldi.

1. Introduction

The association of an image, a painting or a text helped the art of sound to be better received by the listener. Thus, musical programmatism gained ground over absolute music, being a much more accessible method of conveying the poetic and narrative message to the listener.

The term symphonic poem is closely linked to the name of Franz Liszt and was first used in 1854. Musicologist Richard Taruskin argues that Franz Liszt opted for this term in order to be closely linked to the ideal promoted by Hegel's philosophy, which advocated unity between written text and music¹.

It is known that the symphonic poem is an orchestral work in a single movement of variable length, whose score contains the programme presented in the preface, various titles and textual observations written throughout. Symphonic poems offered great compositional freedom from the outset, a liberation from the forms imposed by the symphony genre. However, in early works, such as the symphonic poems *Preludes* and *Orpheus* composed by Franz Liszt or *Macbeth* and *Don Juan* by Richard Strauss, we can observe the use of the sonata. Composer and professor Vasile Herman offers a much clearer picture of the formal evolution of the genre in question. The stages he describes highlight the transition from framing the subject within a fixed pattern to choosing forms according to the

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¹ Richard Taruskin (2005). *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 3, “The Nineteenth Century, Midcentury”, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 419.

literary programme, the latter being the generating factor of the musical architecture. The author concludes that “the symphonic poem is a genre rather than a form of music per se”².

However, the fact that this musical genre involves a single movement gives composers the opportunity to show their skill in the variational technique to which musical themes and motifs are subjected. This manner of processing, although not new, began to be increasingly developed through this type of work and reached its peak with those offered by R. Wagner.

The creations of Liszt and R. Strauss stimulated the imagination of composers, especially those who represented the national schools of the 19th century. Artists such as Bedřich Smetana managed to achieve their aesthetic ideals through this genre, offering remarkable musical achievements, such as the work *Má Vlast*³ (1874-1879), consisting of six symphonic poems describing the beauty of the composer's native country.

Representative works can also be found in Russian musical culture, such as the symphonic poem *Tamara* (1882) composed by Mily Balakirev, inspired by the ballad of the same name written by the poet Mikhail Lermontov, or *The Poem of Ecstasy* (1908) and *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* (1910), composed by Alexander Scriabin, are true musical landmarks of the genre.

Similarly, in Romanian music in the first half of the 20th century, we have as reference models the poems *Marsyas* (1907) composed by Alfonso Castaldi, *Le Temple de Gnide* (1908) and *Narcisse* (1912) by Ion Nonna Otescu, *Didona* (1911) and *Acteon* (1915) by Alfred Alessandrescu, *Poveste indică* (1920) by Mihail Jora, *Isis* (1923) by George Enescu, *Fatma* (1924) by Constantin Bobescu, *Tîndală și Păcală* (1925) and *Pe șesul Moldovei* (1931) by Alexandru Zirra.⁴

2. Alfonso Castaldi (1874-1942)

Alfonso Castaldi went down in Romanian music history as one of the most important professors at the Bucharest Conservatory and as the founder of the composition class at the same institution.

Dedicated to his calling, he took over the composition department, where, in partnership with D.G. Kiriac, he was responsible for teaching composition and counterpoint. Alfonso Castaldi's teaching methods reveal a true exactingness in terms of the themes offered by his students, but also an unprecedented dedication to those who are truly gifted. In the first months of his course, he offered examples from universal musical culture, starting with Bach and Beethoven and moving on to contemporary composers and his own work, with the aim of attracting and

² Vasile Herman (1982). *Originile și dezvoltarea formelor muzicale* [The Origins and Development of Musical Forms], Editura Muzicală, București, p. 76.

³ *My Homeland*, translated from Czech.

⁴ Mihai Popescu (1979). *Repertoriul general al creației muzicale românești* [General Repertory of Romanian Musical Creation], vol. 1, Editura Muzicală, București.

extracting the essence of creativity from his students. In his notes for the composition curriculum, which unfortunately only lasted for two years of study, there is a special focus on understanding and deepening the sonata form, along with the analysis of periods, ideas, and musical expression, all of which contribute to the formation of an analytical and creative spirit.

A complex personality, attracted by art and culture in general, Alfonso Castaldi contributed to and elevated Romanian music education, training notable musicians such as Alfred Alessandrescu, Ion Nonna Otescu, and Dimitrie Cuclin, who were able to carry on the mission of enriching Romanian national culture.

As a composer, Alfonso Castaldi made his mark most strongly in the genre of symphonic music. Although many of his works have been lost over time, the most important ones remain to be appreciated and cherished by future generations.

The context of development in a country that was only beginning to assert itself culturally at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was favourable for Professor Castaldi. Musicologist Vasile Tomescu draws attention to the two main aspects of his symphonism: the program music idea and the complex orchestral writing⁵. These aspects are found in many of his works in this genre, such as the symphonic fairy tale *Fagul roșu* [The Red Beech], *Uvertura Pavana*, *the Symphonic March*, the symphonic triptych *Il giorno*, the poem *Orelor* [The Hours] and the symphonic poem *Thalassa*. Unfortunately, many of these scores were lost in the turmoil of the last century.

2.1. The symphonic poem *Marsyas*

Alongside his teaching activities, Alfonso Castaldi produced several notable works that would change the public's perception of this composer. Among these, the symphonic poem *Marsyas* (1907) revealed a new musical language, in which the creator demonstrated mastery and inspiration. This is evidenced by the reviews dedicated to this symphonic creation, which place it alongside the great contemporary symphonic creations of Western Europe and consider it an important milestone in local creation.

We learn from Vasile Tomescu's research that this symphonic poem was conceived as the first in a cycle of three. The others, *Acteon* and *Misenus*, were assigned to Alfred Alessandrescu, who was encouraged to choose the subject of Acteon, and to Ion Nonna Otescu, for Misenus, to be composed.⁶

After its premiere in 1908 at the Romanian Athenaeum, conducted by the composer, *Marsyas* was performed again in 1909, 1912 and 1913 under the same conductor and with the same orchestra. After the musician's retirement from artistic life, it was performed by George Georgescu in 1923, Ionel Perlea in 1942 with the Radio Orchestra, and Alfred Alessandrescu in 1942 and 1947 in the Radio

⁵ Vasile Tomescu (1962). *Alfred Alessandrescu*, Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, București, p. 113.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 117.

studio and in 1948 at the Athenaeum, with the Radio Broadcasting Orchestra. The success of this work was not only national. In 1909, it was performed in Rostock, Germany with the city's symphony orchestra conducted by Schultz, then in 1925 in the United States by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Frederick Stock.

One of the first things that catches the eye is the subject matter. Alfonso Castaldi drew upon a legend and chose a text by the ancient poet Ovid as his programmatic motto. In the history of the genre, choosing subjects from mythology is relatively rare, with subjects from literature, history, whether national or international, and the world of fantasy usually being preferred.

The work consists of six parts, closely related to the structure of the text. The legend of Marsyas, which served as a source of inspiration, is found on the frontispiece of the score. I believe that the chosen structure is due to the division into paragraphs made by the composer himself. The footnotes accompanying the written presentation of the programme are also interesting, as they provide some additional information.

The entire work is built around the themes of the main characters, Marsyas and Apollo, and the two leitmotifs that precede them. The choice of instruments representing the two protagonists is also ingenious, as is the harmony used for each of their themes. In mythology as well as in the poem, Marsyas is represented by the flute, while Apollo plays the lyre, replaced in the orchestra by the harp. The harmony used for the former's theme is predominantly modal, while for Apollo it is tonal-functional.



Fig. 1 Alfonso Castaldi, *Marsyas*, Marsyas' theme, ms. 30-48



Fig. 2 Alfonso Castaldi, *Marsyas*, melody derived from Marsyas' theme, ms.1-4⁷

⁷ Vasile Tomescu, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

Noteworthy is the archaic flavour of the themes, especially the flute theme, which at times resembles a *doina*, as well as the rubato rhythm, which creates an improvisational character.

Apollo's theme, which begins in the second part of the poem, *Allegro moderato assai*, is also preceded by thematic material initially presented on the clarinet. Given the choice of instrument for the first presentation of this thematic material, we can consider it to be Marsyas' distant cries to Apollo.



Fig. 3 Alfonso Castaldi, *Marsyas*, reference point 6, ms. 2-3⁸



Fig. 4 Alfonso Castaldi, *Marsyas*, Apollo's theme, reference 7, ms. 6-9⁹

Here is a diagram created by musicologist Vasile Tomescu regarding the architecture of the entire poem.

1. Exposition of the flute theme and accompanying replies (A major); brief development;
 2. Exposition of the harp theme and the calls and responses (D flat - G flat); brief development;
 3. Development of the flute theme (apotheosis) (C hypolidian);
 4. Development of the harp theme (apotheosis) (A flat);
 5. Development of the flute theme (mocking of Marsyas) (A hypolidian);
- Ode in memory of Marsyas; coda (C and finale in D)¹⁰.

We also made a diagram of the first two parts of the poem, parts where all the thematic material is presented.

Alfonso Castaldi, <i>Marsyas</i> (1907), Structura părții I (<i>Lentamente</i>)			
Articulație	A	A1 (Tema lui Marsyas)	A2
Măsurile	1-29	30-52	53-82
Cadrul tonal	<i>La major</i> cu inserții modale	<i>Re dorian - Mib dorian - Mib major - Mib dorian - Mi dorian - Mi major</i>	<i>Solb major</i> (V)
Rol dramaturgic	Introdutiv	Expozitiv-dezvoltator	Culminativ - Concluziv

Alfonso Castaldi, <i>Marsyas</i> (1907), Structura părții a II-a (<i>Allegro moderato assai</i>)			
Articulație	B (Chemarea lui Apollo)	B1 (Tema lui Apollo)	B2 (Lupta)
măsurile	83-102	103-122	123-156
Cadrul tonal	<i>Solb major</i> (V)	<i>Solb major</i> (I)	<i>Sib major - Solb major</i>
Rol dramaturgic	Introdutiv	Expozitiv-Dezvoltător	Culminativ - Concluziv

Table 1 Musical architecture of the first two parts of the poem *Marsyas*

⁸ Alfonso Castaldi, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 29-30.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

Through this symphonic poem, Alfonso Castaldi set an example for his students in the composition class. Alfred Alessandrescu, one of them, pointed out the novelty and extraordinary originality that listening to the *Marsyasi* poem offered him and his colleagues¹¹.

With such examples, Castaldi's students created the first important works in the genre of symphonic poem, overture and symphony, and, as Vasile Tomescu points out in writing, “the transition from a period of outdated eclecticism, specific to the creation of this genre by the forefathers of the past century, to a period of superior development, corresponding to the beginning of the century”¹².

3. Alfred Alessandrescu (1893-1959)

We know Alfred Alessandrescu as one of the most important Romanian conductors of the 20th century, as well as a composer, chronicler and teacher. He was one of Alfonso Castaldi's brilliant students and gave Romanian musical culture one of the most important works in the symphonic poem genre. Despite his Western-sounding name, the composer is Romanian, his first name being spelled according to the rules of the time, with two “s” letters.

His name, as well as those of his two brothers, Marc Antoniu and Romeo, was given by an acquaintance of the Alessandrescu family, drawing an analogy with the famous historical characters. The monograph by Vasile Tomescu describes the atmosphere in the artist's family. In a few pages, we learn about their occupations and passions, as well as some information about the father's youth. Vasile Tomescu's monograph describes the atmosphere in the artist's family. In a few pages, we learn about their occupations and passions, as well as some information about the composer's father's youth, an amateur actor, a great admirer and lover of art in general, all of which complete the picture in which the artist developed¹³.

Born in 1893 in Bucharest, he learned his first musical and piano lessons from his mother. Encouraged by his family to pursue his passion for the world of sound, Alfred Alessandrescu made his piano debut on the stage of the Romanian Athenaeum in 1903, performing his own works *Gîndiri gloriose - fantezie* (*Glorious Thoughts - Fantasy*) and *Ideal - reverie* (*Ideal - Reverie*). He then studied at the Conservatory under Emilia Saegiu for piano, D.G. Kiriac for theory and solfeggio, and Alfonso Castaldi for composition.

The artist's life was also marked by the time he spent in the cultural capital of the time, Paris. A. Alessandrescu studied counterpoint and fugue with Paul Vidal at the Conservatory, and at the Schola Cantorum, he studied composition with Auguste Sérieyx and later with Vincent d'Indy. At the same time, he studied

¹¹ Vasile Tomescu, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Vasile Tomescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-8.

at the Faculty of Law in Paris and kept in touch with George Enescu, who lent him scores to study and gave him tickets to various symphonic performances¹⁴.

In addition to his rich conducting and performing activity, A. Alessandrescu was involved in the revival of Romanian cultural life. He participated in discussions on the reform of the Conservatory and the Opera and, out of modesty, refused to take over the leadership of the former institution. Starting in 1920, he participated as a representative of the Ministry in the examination committees at the Conservatory, getting involved in drafting the analytical programme and in discussions about the Opera and Philharmonic seasons. He was involved in the establishment of the Romanian Composers' Society and was a member of the Association of Drama and Music Critics. He became a *répétiteur* at the opera and continued his performing and conducting activities through concerts with great personalities of the time, both at home and abroad¹⁵.

Thanks to his work, the French awarded him the title of “Knight of the Legion of Honour”, the highest French civil and military distinction.

During this period, the composer became increasingly involved in musical activities on the radio. He also continued his work at the Opera, where in 1934 he was given the task of bringing to life the ballet *La piață* composed by Mihail Jora, and was appointed substitute teacher of theory and solfeggio at the Bucharest Conservatory of Music after the death of composer and teacher Gheorghe Cucu¹⁶.

3.1. The symphonic poem *Acteon*

Through his work, which was appreciated both on nationally and international level, Alfred Alessandrescu paved the way for the generation that would lay the foundations and develop the main national musical genres.

His first creation in the symphonic poem genre was entitled *Didona* (1911), but Alfred Alessandrescu's most representative symphonic work is the symphonic poem *Acteon*. The work premiered on 20 December 1915 in Bucharest under the baton of the author. Despite the difficulties associated with the technical parts, it was well received by the public and aroused the interest and praise of contemporary musicians and composers, George Enescu among them.

It is worth mentioning that, in 1916, A. Alessandrescu won first prize for this work at the *George Enescu* composition competition, with a jury composed of A. Castaldi, G. Enescu, Paul Ciuntu, D. G. Kiriac, Dimitrie Dinicu, Ion Nonna Otescu, C. Dimitrescu, Theodor Fuchs and Mihail Mărgăritescu.

Equally important are the composer's statements about how he wrote this poem, recorded by the newspaper “Rampa” on 23 May 1928 in the column *How the most notable Romanian compositions were written*:

¹⁴ Vasile Tomescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-48.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Vasile Tomescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-90.

“How did I work? Usually in front of the piano, which can never deceive you about the sound of harmonic combinations and the chain of tonalities. /.../ Once the thematic elements have been found, the general harmonies and modulations established, and the music sketched out in its essential lines, the composer's real work of construction begins at the desk, where his technique and craft as a sound architect play the leading role.”¹⁷

Internationally, it was conducted by Gabriel Pierné in 1920 in Paris, in concerts at the Colonne, in 1924 by the well-known German conductor Hermann Scherchen, whose repertoire is notable for including new works from all over the world, conducting *Acteon* and other Romanian and George Enescu works in Strasbourg in 1926, New York in 1938 and with the Boston orchestra in 1939.

The most insightful analysis is that of Professor Nadia Boulanger, published in the specialist newspaper “Le Monde Musical” no. 5 on 6 March 1920. The conclusions of this review present a young composer, only 24 years old, who managed to offer musical literature an original symphonic poem in content, but where certain influences from the style of C. Debussy, Paul Dukas and Richard Strauss can still be observed. The author emphasises that the creator's youth is the only reservation when it comes to recognising his talent.

Relevant are the writings in “Le courrier musical”, which specify the influences of Schola Cantorum and Russian music found in the themes of the poem, but also less admired aspects such as its somewhat excessive and dense length¹⁸. Also important are the reviews in “Le Figaro” on 31 March 1924, those in “The New York Times Monday” on 15 March 1929, and those in “Le Temps” on 15 April of the same year.

After a first hearing of this poem, the rich sonorities stand out, with the composer using the entire orchestra in numerous passages, the insertion of the celesta punctuating key moments of the action illustrated, and the numerous changes of metre.

This poem can be compared to *Marsyas* due to the use of the variation technique of the main leitmotifs. In this regard, the composer's own words are relevant:

“To transpose this legend, whose action unfolds over time, into music means to create a symphonic poem constructed according to the typical model of the genre, that is, following the programme as it unfolds, illustrating the main moments of the story. For such an illustration in music, I used the system of leitmotifs, which are particularly suited to an action involving various episodes and which constitute very necessary guides for the listener.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Vasile Tomescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-142.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 65-66.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

The entire creation is based on the principle of variation, starting from the two leitmotifs and the two themes of the main characters. We also find in the frontispiece of the score the legend that guided the composer.



Fig. 5 Alfred Alessandrescu, the hunting motif, ms. 1-3²⁰



Fig. 6 Alfred Alessandrescu, *Acteon*, Acteon's Theme, ms. 86-89²¹



Fig. 7 Alfred Alessandrescu, *Acteon*, Diana's Theme ms. 86-89²²



Fig. 8 Alfred Alessandrescu, *Acteon*, river motif, ms. 86-89²³

As in the case of the poem *Marsyas*, I have created a diagram of the first two parts of the poem:

Partea I (<i>Vivo</i>)	A (motivul vânătorii)	A1 - A2 - A3	A4 (Tema lui Acteon)	A5
Măsurile	1-30	31-140	141-160	161-213
Cadrul tonal	<i>Re#minor</i> cu inserții modale	<i>Si major - Lab major - Fa major</i>	<i>Si major</i>	<i>Si major - Solb minor</i>
Dramaturgia	Introdactiv-expozitiv	Dezvoltator	Introdactiv-expozitiv	Dezvoltător - Concluziv

Partea II (<i>Lento moderato</i>)	B (Motivul răului)	B1(Tema zeiței Diana)	B2 (Pedeapsa lui Acteon)
Măsurile	214-228	103-122	123-156
Cadrul tonal	<i>Si major</i> (V)	<i>Si major - Lab major - Si major</i>	<i>Sib major - Solb major</i>
Dramaturgia	Introdactiv	Expozitiv	Dezvoltător - Concluziv

Table 2 Musical architecture of the first two parts of the poem *Acteon*

I also drew up a diagram showing the programme's development in parts, based on my personal opinion:

1. Part I (*Vivo*) – Presentation of the male character on the hunt;
2. Part II (*Lento moderato*) – Presentation of the goddess Diana in the company of nymphs, discovery of Acteon's indiscretion and his punishment;
3. Part III (*Molto Vivo*) – Acteon, transformed into a stag, is hunted by his friends and hunting dogs;
4. Part IV (*Lento*) – The death of Actaeon.

²⁰ Alfred Alessandrescu, *Acteon*, Symphonic Poem, Full Score, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1956, p. 1.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

²² *Ibidem*, pp. 63-64.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

4. Conclusions

The compositional process unfolds through a succession of variations on the main motifs and themes. The musical value and skill are particularly evident in the orchestration. In addition to the musical language similar to that used by Debussy in the triptych *La Mer*, which can be observed from the very first bars of the poem *Acteon*, both Alessandrescu and Castaldi demonstrate mastery in the use of the orchestral apparatus. The influence of Richard Strauss can be seen in the effervescence and brilliance of the *tutti* moments, in the virtuosity, in the shifting of the thematic material to different groups of instruments and in transpositions to other pitches. All these outlines the action and emotional states through which the main characters pass.

The two works have free structures in which orchestral variation and the punctuating of key motifs guide the form of the work and constitute models for the symphonic poem genre, rising to the quality of those from Western Europe.

Currently, I believe that associating symphonic music with a well-defined text or programme allows the listener to understand the sound universe much more easily, attracts a larger audience that does not necessarily require musical training, and provides the composer with a clear direction for the composition and the opportunity to experiment with various techniques, always using the illustrated text as a reference point.

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