

Stylistic Similarities and Contrasts between George Enescu's *Third Sonata 'in the Romanian Folk Style'* and *Childhood Impressions*

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Abstract: This article explores the stylistic similarities and contrasts between George Enescu's *Third Sonata "in the Romanian Folk Style"* and *Childhood Impressions*, both composed during the mature period of the composer's creative life. Central to the discussion are Enescu's innovative approaches to rhythm, meter, agogics, and modal-harmonic language, as well as his ability to evoke deep emotional and programmatic layers through subtle sonic means. The *Third Sonata* alternates between rhythmic rigor and instability, drawing upon the expressivity of traditional Romanian fiddler music and the qualities of the human voice. In *Childhood Impressions*, rhythmic elements serve a vivid narrative function, depicting natural imagery and childhood memories with remarkable precision and imagination. The article also examines the dense use of tempo and dynamic markings, which contribute significantly to the dramatic articulation and coloristic richness of both works. Particular attention is given to Enescu's ability to generate expressive intensity using delicate dynamics and microstructural agogic changes. Moreover, the programmatic elements in both compositions are shown to transcend surface description, offering complex inner landscapes and psychological depth. The mature Enescu achieves a unique synthesis between folkloric suggestion and structural sophistication, culminating in apotheotic codas that encapsulate a profound existential dimension.

Keywords: George Enescu, Romanian folk elements, Rhythm and agogics, Programmatic music.

1. Introduction and Context

Belonging to the mature period of George Enescu's creative output, the *Third Sonata in the Romanian Folk Style* and *Impresii din copilărie* [Childhood Impressions] bring to the forefront a distinctive style marked by transformations at rhythmic, melodic, modal-harmonic, and dramatic levels.

Rhythm, meter, and agogic fluidity evolved continuously throughout Enescu's works. While the rhythmic writing in his first two sonatas for violin and piano remains relatively conservative, starting with his early 20th-century compositions we observe a process of gradually dissolving traditional structures – those that rely on the perception of metric pillars or strong beats – and replacing them with endless chains

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of syncopations in the most unexpected forms, to the point where the original pulse disappears entirely. The auditory impression is one of continuous gliding, often balanced by a rich harmonic texture capable of producing distinct color.

In the *Third Sonata*, these unstable zones alternate with passages of rigorous rhythmic precision, highlighting the folk-inspired coloristic effect.

2. Rhythmic Innovations and Vocal References

Also in the *Third Sonata*, beyond the impressive rhythmic complexity characteristic of Romanian traditional fiddling performance, we find numerous references to the human voice.

Fig. 1 George Enescu, *Sonata No. 3 for Violin and Piano in A minor* “in Romanian Folk Style”, ms. 5-10

The obsessive alternation between duplets and triplets, the expressive legato, and indications such as *senza rigore* and *tranquillo* create a moment of extreme suppleness and tenderness, directly associated with vocal expression.

Remus Azoitei draws an insightful parallel between the structure of Ravel’s *Tzigane Rhapsody* and this elaborate chamber work, highlighting the strength of the latter’s formal framework. He underscores Enescu’s ability to distance himself from the formal approaches employed in his early works—such as the Romanian Rhapsodies, which, although rich in folkloric spirit, lack substantial construction—and to assert a clear, classically inspired architecture. This structure is cloaked in an impressive local color, a combination capable of conferring the qualities of a truly unique masterpiece¹.

The work suggests a genuine authentication of *fiddler* performance practice, not only of the *țambal* and *cobza*, but especially of the violin. Enescu employs the rigor of classical idioms to portray the captivating timbres, articulations, dynamic subtleties, and agogic flexibility that characterize Romanian folk music.

A distinctive feature of the *Third Sonata* lies in its notational innovations, which extend into previously uncharted territory within the European tradition. Enescu devises a new symbolic system to notate microtonality on the violin: a flat with a diagonal slash lowers the pitch by a quarter-tone, while a similarly altered sharp raises it by the same interval. The performance instructions at the beginning of the violin part form a dense legend that might appear discouraging to many performers, due to the abundance and precision of markings whose cumulative effect, paradoxically, often seems remarkably subtle. Thus appear signs such as *mp*, *bp*, *pf*, *bf*, *psf*, *bsf*, *prfz*, *brfz*—indications that generate microscopic distinctions within the sonic discourse, giving the music an expressive nuance and authenticity rarely encountered in Western notational systems of the time.

3. Programmatic Rhythm and Imagery in *Childhood Impressions*

A refined example of masterful rhythmic expressivity appears in the miniature *Pârâiaș în fundul grădinii* [*The Brook at the Back of the Garden*] from *Childhood Impressions*. This scene is vividly painted through sextuplet groups combined with sixteenth-note duplet and triplet figures, brilliantly illustrating the winding and lively path of the water stream, seemingly circling around a stone.

Notably, this scene follows the highly intricate *Lăutarul* [*The Fiddler*], where the narrative unfolds through a cadence of metrical-rhythmic structures. Continuing further, we encounter *Pasărea din colivie* [*The Caged Bird*], in which the violin appears to improvise — though no sound is left to chance; every detail is meticulously notated. Similarly, in *Cucul din perete* [*The Cuckoo in the Wall*], the rhythmic character is built upon alternating triplets and duplets, sometimes elliptically omitting a sixteenth note.



Fig. 2 G. Enescu, *Childhood Impressions – The Bird in the Cage and the Cuckoo in the Wall*, ms. 18-19

Enescu recounted that the cuckoo was a mechanical one and was loved almost as much as the poor caged bird. The striking of seven o'clock at the end of the scene symbolized the moment when the bird was to be covered for the night.

In *Cântecul de leagăn* [Lullaby], we again witness a combination of stable and fragmented meters — for example, 2/4 or 4/4 with 3/8 — with an unexpected cadence occurring after just three and a half bars, subtly evoking the ancestral tenderness of the Romanian soundscape. In *Luna care traversează ferestrele* [The Moon Crossing the Windows], the rhythmic material is built on streams of six sixteenth notes played in a diaphanous dynamic, imparting an ethereal, flowing, almost unreal atmosphere — in sharp contrast with the well-defined rhythm of *Vântul în șemineu* [The Wind in the Fireplace] and especially *Răsăritul de soare* [Sunrise], which presents an overwhelming vision of pulse, with downbeats seemingly sculpted to depict explosive collisions between the vertical dimension (to which the composer aspires) and the horizontal one (to which he still belongs).

4. Tempo and Dynamic Nuance in Enescu's Mature Works

A fundamental feature of Enescu's mature works is his handling of tempo and dynamics. It is well known that upon their first encounter with the score of the *Third Sonata* or *Childhood Impressions*, performers are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume of interpretive markings. Tempo changes are frequent — sometimes occurring measure by measure.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for G. Enescu's *Sonata a III-a "in Romanian Folk Style", Part I*, measures 89-92. The score is written for piano and features a complex rhythmic structure in 3/8 time. The first system begins with a tempo marking of quarter note = 60 and a dynamic of *pp*. It transitions to a tempo of quarter note = 72 with a dynamic of *mp* and the marking *espress. mesto*. The second system starts with a tempo of quarter note = 60 and a dynamic of *pp*, then changes to quarter note = 72 with a dynamic of *mf* and the marking *sost. lanchoso*. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth notes and rests, and dynamic markings such as *pp*, *mp*, and *mf*.

Fig. 3 G. Enescu, *Sonata a III-a "in Romanian Folk Style", Part I*, ms. 89–92

In *Impressions from Childhood*, the variation of tempi supports the idea of an impressionistic compositional aesthetic. The opening is marked at quarter note = 52, a rather flowing tempo that subsequently shifts to 46, 42, and 40 (the principal indications, interrupted by insertions reflecting limited deviations in flow – 52 and 46 on the metronome). The choice of a descending tempo curve

reflects the depiction of a delicate stream that gradually grows, accumulating an impressive volume—an evolution that calls for a significantly slower pace.

Fig. 4 G. Enescu, *Childhood Impression - Pârâiaș în fundul grădinii* [*The Brook at the Back of the Garden*], ms. 1-5

At the same time, an interesting relationship may be established between the harmonic structures—initially not overly dense, in accordance with the fluid movement—and the tempo map, highlighting the inverse relationship between motion and harmonic weight. In other words, as the sonorities become more chromatic, at times even evoking richly exotic inflections, the tempo slows down to support the imagined effect of the brook transforming into a grand and imposing flow.

In the same context, the writing in the penultimate tableau of *Childhood Impressions*, stands out through several elements, primarily related to dynamics. What strikes the listener is the muted effect accompanying the violin line throughout the entire section, as well as the consistently restrained dynamic range of the piano part. The tableau is constructed through ascending sequences, repeated without pause from the bass to the treble register—a continuously repressed motion, underscored by indications such as *obscuro*, *sordamente*, and *fluttuoso*.

Enescu deliberately avoids creating violent or overtly dramatic effects, choosing instead to counter the apotheotic discourse with the evocation of two principal sound layers: one suggestive of wind (through chromaticism and dynamic contouring—*crescendi* and *decrescendi*), and the other of thunder, which intermittently disrupts the otherwise steady sonic flow (through sudden dynamic peaks). Thunderclaps are articulated at key moments: measure 7 (*pf* > *molto p*), 18 (*rfz*), 24 (*ten. ff* in the violin), and 26 (*ff* in both violin and piano)—the final major outburst in the overall narrative.

The variation of tempi throughout the work further supports the idea of an impressionistic compositional aesthetic. The opening is marked at quarter note = 52, a rather flowing tempo that subsequently shifts to 46, 42, and 40—principal tempo markings occasionally interrupted by brief insertions at 52 and 46, reflecting subtle fluctuations in pace. The descending tempo curve reflects the image of a delicate stream gradually growing in force, accumulating volume—a transformation that calls for an increasingly slower pulse.

Moreover, an interesting relationship emerges between harmonic structure and tempo: the initial harmonies are relatively light, in keeping with the fluent motion, but as the harmonic language becomes more chromatic—at times even richly exotic—the tempo slows down to sustain the imagined evolution of the brook into a grand and imposing flow. In some cases, an extraordinary number of agogic modifications can be identified within a 2–3-minute passage. For example, in *Luna care traversează ferestrele* [*The Moon Crossing the Windows*], no fewer than 14 different tempo indications appear.

Similar observations apply to dynamic markings. Enescu's mature compositions feature an astonishing variety of expressive nuances, with a particular emphasis on soft dynamics — ranging from *ppp* to *mp* — which serve to produce distinctive colors within specific sections. Alongside his abundant agogic indications, dynamics are used to animate even the smallest musical cells, offering them either energy or heightened delicacy.

At the same time, the need for elevated dramatic articulation calls for exceptional dynamic range, marked by striking contrasts. It is worth noting that the completion of *Œdipe* in 1922 had a profound impact on the composer's subsequent chamber works for violin and piano. The heightened dramatic demands introduced in *Œdipe* would soon permeate his instrumental writing, bringing with them an expanded emotional and expressive scope.

5. Programmatic Suggestiveness and Folkloric Symbolism

When discussing the *Sonata Torso*, scholars have emphasized the importance of the coda in shaping the overall dramatic conception. However, this coda merely foreshadows the apotheotic grandeur found in the conclusions of both the *Third Sonata* and *Childhood Impressions* — truly exceptional moments, nearly impossible to match in terms of dramatic intensity within a work limited to just two instruments. This immense release of energy is further enhanced by the programmatic nature of the two compositions.

In *Childhood Impressions*, the programmatic intent is made explicit through the titles of the individual tableaux. In contrast, the *Third Sonata* evokes its own narrative world through references to the *mioritic* space of Romanian folklore, nature imagery, and the imitation of folk instruments and sounds. Musicologist Pascal Bentoiu categorizes Enescu's descriptive elements into three types: external, internal, and external as seen from within. These categories

can also be applied to the Romanian folk elements in the *Third Sonata* — such as the *fluiet* (shepherd's pipe), the obsessive cricket motif in the second movement, the *hora* appearing in varied forms across the second and third movements, the *țambal* with its characteristic resonance, *chiuituri* (shouts), *whistling*, leaf-blowing sounds, and the whirling wind.

What defines the dramaturgy of these two works is the eloquence of suggestion — their ability to create images that are instantly and precisely identifiable by the listener. All of these elements reinforce the notion of the “*Romanian folk character*”. However, in *Childhood Impressions*, this idea is deepened and nuanced through the expansion of the natural tableaux. The apocalyptic *Furtună în noapte* [*Storm at Night*], for instance, is presented from an unusual perspective: not as an objective portrayal of a natural phenomenon, but as seen and felt by a terrified child. The focus is on the child's inner emotional world, which Enescu invites us to inhabit.

Here, the composer alters the angle of perception, channeling repressed energy into a musical texture that is not overly dense. The dynamic palette — *pp*, *p*, *mp* — is surprisingly restrained for a scene meant to depict a violent storm, and the use of mute on the violin throughout the entire tableau contributes to the atmosphere of subdued tension. Had the sonority been more robust or texturally dense, the center of gravity and dramaturgical arc of the work would likely have shifted. In this form, however, the paroxysmal climax in *Răsăritul de soare* (*Sunrise*) emerges as a golden crown — a culminating point that casts existential light over the entire work.

6. Conclusion: Expressive Synthesis and Existential Reach

In both the *Third Sonata* and *Childhood Impressions*, George Enescu achieves a rare and profound synthesis between folk inspiration, programmatic expressiveness, and refined structural craftsmanship. His control over rhythm,agogics, and dynamic subtleties allows for immense emotional resonance, while the interplay between evocative gesture and rigorous construction creates works of both poetic immediacy and lasting depth.

Through imagery, rhythm, color, and contrast, these two works not only honor Enescu's Romanian roots but also explore universal human emotions — nostalgia, fear, wonder, and transcendence — placing them among the most significant achievements of 20th-century chamber music.

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