

# RECENZII

## ***Komponistinnen aus Rumänien (Women Composers from Romania)<sup>1</sup>***

**Thorsten Gubatz<sup>2</sup>**



During her activity as a professor at the University of Oldenburg in Germany (from 1996 to 2021), Violeta Dinescu created an extraordinary communication hub for contemporary music in general, and for Romanian contemporary music in particular. November 2006 saw the first “ZwischenZeiten-Symposium”, an annual academic meeting on Romanian music and its international context, which has been continued by German musicologist Michael Heinemann at Dresden’s College of Music. In

2013, the symposium gave rise to the academic publication series “Archiv für osteuropäische Musik. Quellen und Forschungen (Archive for Eastern European Music. Sources and Research)”. During the 5th “ZwischenZeiten-Symposium” in 2010, on “Myriam Marbe and the Romanian women composers in the European context of the 20th and

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21st centuries”, the idea was born to dedicate a book to these composers. Now, after almost 15 years, this book has been published as Vol. 8 of the “Archiv für osteuropäische Musik”.

The book has four main sections. The first consist of essays with more or less general reflections on the topic; the second contains interviews with several Romanian women composers, where flute virtuoso Ion Bogdan Ștefănescu proves to be an equally brilliant interlocutor; the third is a series of short portraits with a photo, a quote, a biographical outline in tabular form, and a worklist for each composer; and the fourth comprises essays again, but now on individual works. The editors’ decision for this overall conception of the book was a most lucky one, since it allows the book to shed light on its subjects in many different ways, and also to be read in many different ways. If section I gives a multifaceted *tour d’horizon* in appropriately scholarly prose, section II allows of an encounter with the artists as direct and vivid as a book can offer; section III allows to have a look at them and corresponds to a lexicographical desideratum, whereas section IV gives some concrete insights into the composers’ art.

Concerning section I, it might have been a luckier choice to put the essays of Christel Nies (pp. 119-126), Dana Cristina Probst (pp. 127-154) and Adalbert Grote (pp. 155-167) not at its end, but at its beginning, since it is them that give a real introduction to the topic. Grote is right to remark that the percentage of women composers in Romania since communist times seems to be lower than that in Germany (20,03% vs. 27%), but that many more women composers achieved prominence in Romania (see p. 155). This cannot be due only to communist agendas of equality, since Romania is unique in this respect, also inside the Eastern bloc. Who are the other truly prominent women composers in the Eastern bloc, apart from the Romanians? Ljubica Marić in Yugoslavia; Galina Ustvolskaya, Sofia Gubaidulina and Elena Firsova in Soviet Russia; Grażyna Bacewicz in Poland; Ruth Zechlin in the German Democratic Republic. Zlata Tkaci in Soviet Moldova, Erzsébet Szőnyi in Hungary, and Marta Jiráčková in Czechoslovakia, made a career in their countries, but are less well known. It is also remarkable that, even in Romania, there have hardly been any women conductors. The only woman in the Eastern bloc with a truly major

career as a conductor was Veronika Dudarova in Moscow. In Romania, Florica Dimitriu's career was cut short after Ceaușescu came to power, and the next prominent woman conductor would be Carmen Maria Cârnecki, some decades later.

One may regret that, for all of this, the book gives no thorough explanation. But more than explaining it, the truly important task may be first to bring the Romanian bloom of women composers to the minds of non-Romanian – in this case, German-speaking – readers, to situate it inside the bloom of Romanian *muzica culta* since the 1950s, inside Romanian culture as such, and in their international context. Several voices in the book agree on an especially strong continuity of mythical, religious, folkloristic traditions in Romanian culture, which allows them to serve as an inspiration also to contemporary composers. Wherever such a strong and living culture of seeking to represent the archetypal meets with other cultures, an abundance of creative syntheses can emerge. A modernism that keeps strong ties with folk culture and is at the same time open to the rest of the world is indeed a thing of magic power. Grote (see pp. 89sq.) refers to Mircea Eliade's work as a prime example of Romania's being such a kind of *creuset culturel*, and composer Dana Cristina Probst invokes the spirit of Constantin Brâncuși in this sense for formulating an artistic manifesto, claiming "the necessity of rediscovering the spiritual landmarks and the continuous, vigorous cultural sources of contemporary music – an art that today is strongly impeded by untenable fashions, by sterile, contentless experiments and market pressure. The Romanian spirituality – be it the age-old traditional peasant culture from which the sculptor Brâncuși came, or the Christian Orthodox culture – has the characteristics of a space of interference, equally open to the West and to the East." (p. 132) Grote situates the works of Myriam Marbe, Doina Rotaru, Mihaela Vosgian and Irinel Anghel in such a cultural horizon (pp. 70-107); one should add that also their male Romanian contemporaries like Corneliu Cezar, Octavian Nemescu, Horațiu Rădulescu and Liviu Dăncănu went for such artistic explorations of the archetypal both in the Romanian and other cultures.

One of the typical 'Western' questions concerning a bloom like that of the Romanian *muzica culta* since the 1950s is how it was possible

under dictatorships like that of Gheorghiu-Dej and of Ceaușescu. Part of the answer may be that the world of music was experienced as a counterworld – as “a wonderful world of its own, a laboratory, in which things were discussed and discovered” (composer Irina Hasnaș, cited by Grote, p. 162). Concerning the situation of women in particular, there is a certain consensus that more often than not, the hardships they had to face “resulted in the formation of strong, self-determined personalities” (p. 159). “What does not kill me makes me stronger”, as Nietzsche would have it, and the interview section of the book, which is delightful to read, gives ample evidence for this.

Anyway, this can be only part of the answer, since not everywhere where there is oppression there is also a comparably rich counterworld. And if it only had been counterworld dynamics that allowed Romanian modernism and postmodernism to thrive like the Amazon rainforest, one should wonder why it did not perish when Romanian communism did. Grote writes, “Romanian artists soon noticed that the state had stopped subsidizing culture, since there was no more necessity for representing socialism effectively. The requirement to perform a contemporary piece at the beginning of each concert was equally abolished. This deprived both the Composers’ Union and the individual artists of vital financial resources. Culture now increasingly functioned according to capitalist principles.” (p. 163) But may it therefore be taken at face value that the communist dictatorship was replaced by the market’s dictatorship? Were there no strong structures that fostered the bloom of the Romanian *muzica culta* and that keep doing so? If not, why does this bloom persist? Because it constitutes a counterworld to the market’s dictatorship as well? But that can also only be part of the answer.

One of the nicest compliments that could be done to the Romanian *muzica culta* of our days was given by composer Diana Rotaru. Asked by Ion Bogdan Ștefănescu: “Which era of music history appeals to you the most?”, she replied: “I’m inclined to say, the current one. I believe that we experience an especially fertile time, concerning the creative process. There is such a big aesthetic freedom at our time, the avantgardists are no longer so ‘puristic’ and the traditionalists no longer so ‘rigid’.” (p. 230) After her great experiences at the Paris

Conservatory, she said, "I preferred to come home. I didn't regret it for one second, because I feel freer at home." (p. 232)

A country with a musical tradition as rich as that of Germany has all good reasons in the world to take interest in what has been going on in Romania. This may go well together with the general increased interest of the major power of the European Union in the latter's members and candidates. Christel Nies quotes the former director of Berlin's Romanian Cultural Institute, Adriana Popescu, that this constellation "changed the perspective radically and created more precise contours for Romania in the European consciousness" (p. 121). If the general interest is to be given more precise contours, and if a particular interest and appreciation is to be awakened, rich and valid information must be given and good stories must be told. The new book on women composers from Romania does a good job about this especially in sections II and III. The interviews of section II, as said above, allow of an encounter with the artists as direct and vivid as a book can offer, whereas section III allows to have a look at them and corresponds to a lexicographical desideratum. The importance of this desideratum can hardly be overstated. Who doubts this may take a look at the "Antiques Roadshow" on BBC or similar programs on German TV ("Kunst und Krempel", "Bares für Rares") where people present something they own to antiques appraisers and/or dealers. One may come up there with a masterpiece, but if no one recognizes it, no one will be interested, and no one will pay a penny; one may as well come up with a broken toilet bowl, proving that Prince So-and-so sat on it on the eve of revolution, be the star of the show and return home rich. Again and again, the general imperative will be: Show what you've got, give good expertise, and tell true good stories! – But the greatest expert concerning detailed information on Romanian music, the authority of Romanian musical lexicography, Viorel Cosma (1923-2017), is no longer with us. Romanian music needs work like his, and work as it is done in section III, for standing up against any complacent ignorance that may condemn masterpieces of Romanian music wholesale as "obscure" because it has no valid information on them.

Concerning the choice of the composers represented in this volume, it goes by itself that there can never be complete justice about

whom to include and whom not. Most of the composers are still alive, and it is principally impossible to write a history of the present. Anyway, some names should be mentioned that are obviously missing – firstly, Mansi Barberis; secondly, Adriana Hölszky, who emigrated very early, but is born in Bucharest and was a student of Niculescu there; and what happened to Silvia Macovei? From 1997 to 2000, she composed an opera-oratorio in which she set to music Dante’s entire “Divina Commedia”. In the following years, she was highly recognized in Romania for a couple of smaller works, but in 2007, she somehow disappeared into thin air. I have asked many Romanian musicians what became of her – so far no one could tell me. One could also have included women composers from Soviet resp. Republica Moldova.

Finally, one could have wished some of the contributions by Romanian musicologists to have been translated into a more idiomatic German. But even more desirable, for the sake of reaching a national and a wider international audience for this important volume, would be a Romanian and an English version.

## **SUMMARY**

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***Komponistinnen aus Rumänien***  
***(Women Composers from Romania)***

Romanian-German composer and musicologist Violeta Dinescu, together with fellow musicologists Michael Heinemann and Roberto Reale, has edited a (mostly) German-language book on women composers from Romania. Its four main sections contain general reflections on the topic, interviews with several composers, then short portraits (including a biographical outline and a worklist for each composer), and essays on individual works. This allows the volume to shed light on its subjects in many different ways, and also to be read in many different ways. It is to be hoped that this important book will raise attention and appreciation for the extraordinary bloom of the Romanian *muzica culta* from the 1950s until today, with its unique multitude of

prominent women composers. The interviews allow the reader of delightful encounters with engaging, strong and brilliant personalities. But also the importance of the lexicographical part can hardly be overstated, since such work is vital for standing up against any complacent ignorance that may condemn masterpieces of Romanian music wholesale as “obscure” because it has no valid information on them. There should also be Romanian and English versions of this book.