

DAN BUCIU (1943-2025): Essential motifs in choral music. Case study – Small Winter Suite for children's a cappella choir

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Abstract: *The composer, theorist, and professor Dan Buciu (1943-2025) was one of the great promoters of Romanian choral music, whose course he shaped both as a creator and as a leader of national choral associations. As a professor of harmony, Dan Buciu was able to experiment like no one else with the choral language, the analysis of which occupied him throughout his life: both in the tonal and modal realms. His collection of choral works was published by the Music Publishing House of the Union of Composers and Musicologists of Romania in 1993, the pieces being selected by the author himself from among the most significant. As an important gesture of general analysis, we will attempt to extract some of his creative principles from one of the works that define him.*

Key-words: *modernity, choir, miniature, children, a cappella.*

1. Introduction

The composer, theorist, and professor Dan Buciu was also one of the great promoters of Romanian choral music, whose development he influenced both as a creator and from the perspective of the National Choral Association of Romania and the Union of Composers and Musicologists, which he led in matters concerning the art dedicated to vocal ensembles. A professor of harmony, Dan Buciu was able to experiment like no one else with the choral language, whose analysis occupied him throughout his life: both in the tonal and modal realms (native music, a field in which we find a treatise on modal writing that is a reference for all Romanian musicians).

Born on November 18, 1943, in Bucharest into a family of musicians, he inherited primarily from his father the tradition of education in the art of sound. He had only one thought (as he confided to me in his last interview): to create

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harmonies from melodies. His father, Mircea Buciu (1907-1970), became one of the great soloists of the Bucharest Opera (with a nationally and internationally acclaimed career), after studying at the Saint Nicholas Theological Seminary in Râmnicu-Vâlcea and completing his theological and musical studies in Bucharest), also becoming a singer at the Patriarchal Cathedral in Bucharest at the onset of the Second World War.

Having become a professor in the capital as well, he educated his son in the spirit of great music: thus Dan Buciu inherited the love for choral music, which he composed extensively, alongside symphonic-concertante works. Few creators have the gift of being theorists, filtering in writing the principles of artistic creation: Dan Buciu authored several treatises on tonal and modal harmony, on musical analysis, and wrote articles and reviews, recollections, and many other texts with an educational-musical focus.

Although “the increasingly complex interference of different musical genres and forms led, in the second half of the 20th century, to the creation and crystallization of new modes of choral expression. Through ingenious technical elaborations, suggestive harmonic-polyphonic solutions, or novel sound systems, the composers of this period intensely explored the potential of Romanian folklore” (Moraru 2012, 41), there are still voices that preserve the traditionalism of expression and the limitations of children's folklore in bringing winter customs back to the foreground – one of them being the personality of the composer Dan Buciu.

His very mentor, Alexandru Pașcanu, stated about his personality: “the composer Dan Buciu was one of the first theorists in the realm of Romanian musical modalism. Many years ago, he was the one who had the courage to take this step (...), opting for a difficult task, unlike many of his contemporaries who comfortably merge their voices with the latest trendy outcry” (Frățilă 2016, 3) – a precious proof of his authenticity. “In recent decades, more and more composers approach, seeking to intuit, to trace contours, even paths toward solid ground, where harmony can feel at home, in a place other than that of the classical tradition” (Buciu 2014, 5) – said the same Alexandru Pașcanu in the preface to the volume *A Small Treatise on Modal Writing* by Dan Buciu.

Having studied folklore with one of the greatest personalities in the field, Emilia Comișel, between 1962 and 1968 at the Ciprian Porumbescu Conservatory in Bucharest, Dan Buciu fondly recalled engaging in the actual collection of folklore, an unforgettable experience that brought him to the source of the value of this genre and revealed to him the great possibilities for transforming the sound message available in this multi-millennial stylistic area.

In 1992, Dan Buciu obtained a PhD in Musicology with the thesis *Elements of Modal Writing*; being passionate about choral music, Dan Buciu became involved in

organizing the National Choral Association of Romania, being a founding member and, later, honorary president and, (...) although his compositional output, which is very prolific, encompasses a wide range of genres (vocal music, symphonic music, vocal-symphonic music, chamber music, based on a language forged in the crucible of his personal style, in the originality of the modalism of his works foreshadowing structures of folk or Byzantine origin), Dan Buciu has always shown a preference for choral music: poetry has been the genre that inspired him in creating expansive vocal-symphonic works: *Nostalgii eminesciene* (1982) – sung for mixed choir and orchestra, lyrics by Mihai Eminescu, *Cantata larba pământului* for soprano, flute, percussion, and string orchestra on texts by Nina Cassian, *Ana lui Manole* for choir and folk instruments with theatrical movement, *Requiem for Me*, on his own text for soprano and chamber orchestra, *Frica* for mixed choir a cappella on texts by Nichita Stănescu.

The composer's collaboration with the Madrigal choir conducted by Marin Constantin, *Remember Hiroshima for choir and tape*, remaining one of the landmark works in the band's golden repertoire" (Popescu, 2025).

2. Dan Buciu – Choral Works: Small Winter Suite (Case Study)

His collection of choral works was published by the Musical Publishing House of the Union of Composers and Musicologists of Romania in 1993, with the pieces selected by the author himself from among the most significant. As an important gesture of general analysis, we will try to extract some of his creative principles from one of the works that best defines him.

Based on verses from children's folklore, Dan Buciu composed the *Small Winter Suite for a cappella children's choir*, within which four sections follow one another: Allegretto mosso-Vivo-Moderato-Tempo giusto (quasi allegro). The first section is a small popular rondo, in which a refrain based on a simple, modal-type melody:

1 Hai co - lin - da, co - lin - di - ța, Dai - miș ma - lo lo - po - ti - ța

2 Hai co - lin - da, co - lin - di - ța, Dai - miș ma - lo lo - po - ti - ța

Ex. 1. *Dan Buciu, "Small Winter Suite" for a cappella children's choir, part I, m. 1-4*

The refrain returns each time slightly modified, despite the very small size of the beginning of the choral suite. From the very start, it is sung in double form, offering simple phrases that characterize children's folklore: in unison between the two voices of the children's choir a cappella (measures 1-4), then attempting an incipient two-voice polyphony (measures 5-8).

The first of the refrains/episodes uses the repetition of basic intervals of the refrain (ascending perfect fifth and ascending perfect fourth), used alternately in the upper and lower voices (measures 9-12). As can be seen, the formal pattern of the four-measure phrase is what defines this choral miniature. Diatonicism and vocality are other constants of this work, alongside the intervention of percussion instruments in complementing the children's voices.

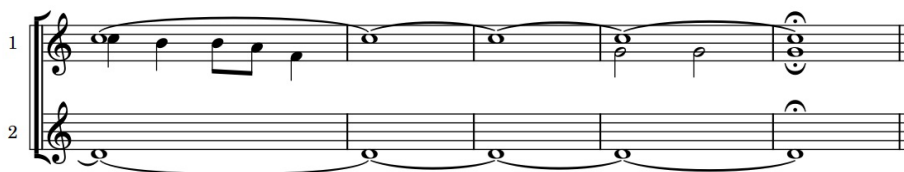
1 Că'i cu miei, cu pur-cei, Cu co-pii - i du-pă ei, Că'i cu miei, cu pur-cei,

2 Că'i cu miei, cu pur - cei, Cu co-pii - i du-pă ei, Că'i cu miei, cu pur -

Ex. 2. *Dan Buciu, "Small Winter Suite" for a cappella children's choir, part I m. 9-12*

The second chorus returns with the same melodic path, but the polyphony articulated in the second voice is a return to simplicity, proposing a sound pattern that creates a suggestion of heterophony at its beginning: it reappears starting from measure 13 and 33, with small variations specific to the genre. The last appearance of the chorus (meas. 37) brings back the simplicity of the first

formulation, where, at the level of a period, the first phrase uses unison between the two voices, and the second phrase features two-voice polyphony. The ending disintegrates this chorus, from which only the initial motif survives.



Ex. 3. Dan Buciu – “Small Winter Suite” for a cappella children's choir, part I, m. 45-49

If the second movement uses the shouted singing of children and a few percussion instruments (tunable and untunable), the third section (Moderato) proposes a new melodic approach inspired by folk music, which begins on a G1 modal center, so that the cadential act is realized on the E1 sound (with a minor third descending, typical of Romanian folklore).

The mixed and mobile meter characterizes this innocent melody, with a narrow range of a fifth; the asymmetric accents (resulting from the alternation of 5/8 and 3/8 meters) highlight the purity of the repetitive sound progression, typical of children's folklore.



Ex. 4. Dan Buciu - “Small Winter Suite” for a cappella children's choir, Moderato, part. III, m. 1-4

The fourth section is based on one of the most well-known Romanian carols (Sculați, sculați, gospodari) and remains within the same stylistic realm of melodic naivety, marked by the asymmetry of a meter that changes according to the structure of the words in the text (5/8, 6/8): the same repetitiveness grounded in minimalism, the same limited melodic means (with the addition of a descending

sixth leap and an ascending perfect fourth), this time with pedal tones that provide a question-answer, *proposta-risposta*, statement-echo structure.

The stability of the scale's root is shown through the repetition of the note G1, creating, between the two voices, a carousel that seems to rest on the root note - embodying the naturalness and fragility of a child's soul.

Tempo giusto (quasi allegro)
ben *f*

1
2

Scu - lați, scu - lați gos - po - dari

Că vă vin co - lin - dă - tori

Ex. 5. *Dan Buciu* – “*Small Winter Suite*” for a cappella children's choir, part. IV, m. 1-4

The sense of humor (which the author himself possessed and which he also asks of the conductor and the audience in the brief explanation accompanying the work) is what leads him to propose other possible sequences of the work's sections, changing the title to SMALL WINTER SUITE in this case.

Folk inspiration and the joy of simple musical articulation resonate with the authentic depth of the emotional state that accompanies a faithful person during the Christmas Fast, right up to the threshold of the great celebration of the Savior's Birth. The music respects folk suggestions, the technical and expressive possibilities of the a cappella children's choir, and presents to the audience a glimpse of what the winter customs of the Romanian people mean, in the voices of children.

Other choral works that explore folk modalism are:

- ♦ AIDI, NANI, PUIU MAMI, based on a song collected in the village of Hălăucești, Iași County
- ♦ DE S-AR VINDE DRAGOSTEA (on a melody from Gâlsești, Teleorman County)
- ♦ PE ULȚA NOASTRĂ-N SUSU (inspired by a song from Drăguș, Făgăraș County)
- ♦ MĂRIE, MĂRIE (a dialogue between two characters from a folk creation from Ciclova Montană, Banat)
- ♦ CULCĂ-MI-TE MITITEL (Argeș County, Ștefănești)
- ♦ BALADA FLORII for mixed choir a cappella (based on folk verses and musical motifs, dedicated to the memory of his father, Mircea Buciu)
- ♦ SMALL CONIFEROUS SUITE, LITTLE CONES for equal-voice choir, on folk verses
- ♦ COLEA-N SUS, PE MARE-N SUS

In all these works, the same **principles of creation** can be noticed, which affirms the unity of thought and expression in the choral art of maestro Dan Buciu: simple modal scales with few elements, reflecting the melodic authenticity of Romanian folk art, a flexible, unpredictable metro-rhythmic path (within which asymmetric accents succeed in mixed meters), an airy, clear, transparent choral discourse, folk versification (which brings with it the dialects specific to each area from which a particular song was collected, along with their system of accents), the existence of relay polyphony between voices (which allows the free circulation of a motif – with modifications/repetitions or not – within the self-imposed perimeter of a retained melodic framework) and a type of harmonization that always leaves space for reflection on the original song that inspired the entire composition (a generous treatment, which protects the secret of the original melody, which does not impose itself compositionally at the expense of revealing the ancestral musical truth).

Modalism is an absolute constant in Dan Buciu's creation, in which he found himself through the simplicity of scales and melodic-harmonic expression, through his attachment to the ancestral values of the Romanian people: "the modal is the idea that has dominated my entire creation. Involuntarily or premonitionally, even in my first serious work there was (...) a certain modal freedom in places.

Further on, (...) the modal element began to insinuate itself more and more consistently, starting primarily from the two sources of Romanian traditional music (musical folklore and Orthodox psaltic music) and, besides these, also the idea of an artificial modalism, which very often for me is linked to a starting point that I also find in the area of the scales of natural modes – when I say natural I mean that they belong to a traditional culture, not in the diatonic sense. I have practiced the strategy of complementary modes, of super-octave modes, or certain constructions that I have made, but always in relation to these traditional elements. Here there is a very close connection between the idea of sliding-step scales in Romanian folklore or Byzantine music and these modes that I have imagined and used" (Frăţilă 2016, 5-6).

3. Conclusions

The organizational spirit and pragmatism that dominated the author throughout his entire academic career brought him to the position of professor of harmony and master of Romanian choral art. The small Christmas suite is an example of authenticity and purity, of faith and attachment to the deepest values of native nodal vocality. His choral music remains, like a spiritual mirror, at the same levels of clarity and impeccable structuring that we find throughout his entire body of work.

The composer stated, in support of the idea of promoting the authenticity of Romanian folk modal music, in an environment that, already in the 1960s-70s, diverted the compositional path towards serialism: “the thing that best defines each Romanian composer is the fact that he belongs to this Romanian school and not the fact that he embraced one stylistic direction or another” (Frățilă 2016, 4).

Dan Buciu noted, with modesty and honesty, his belonging to the Romanian school of composition, to the sonic values of the space in which he grew up: “everyone noticed that despite some stylistic differences, compositional techniques, and language, Romanian works with the most diverse orientations have a common denominator somewhere. Well, I believe that I belong to this Romanian school, and that is enough” (Frățilă, 2016, 5). Not by chance, Dan Buciu has been awarded six prizes by the Union of Composers and Musicologists of Romania, and in 2021 he received the Grand Prize of this guild. Additionally, in February 2025 he was awarded the Marin Constantin Prize by the *Madrigal* Foundation – his last opportunity to be on stage and speak to the music-loving audience.

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