

## **Sabin Drăgoi's Music in the Romanian Propaganda Film *Mitrea Cocor***

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**Abstract:** This study examines the film „Mitrea Cocor” as a representative product of the cultural propaganda in Romania at the beginning of the socialist era, analysing the ways in which literature, cinema, and music were ideologically instrumentalized. At the centre of this research stands the contribution of composer Sabin Drăgoi, one of the pioneers of Romanian film music, whose score combines folkloric language, miniature technique, and the descriptive function specific to the period. The analysis of the manuscript and of the relationship between image and sound reveals the use of music as a narrative, symbolic, and propagandistic vehicle, marked by the predominance of illustrative moments and fragmentary thematic structures. The study also highlights the tension between Drăgoi's compositional rigor and the ideological constraints of the early 1950s, offering insight into the early development of Romanian film music and the ways in which art was shaped by the political context of the time.

Key-words: *Sabin drăgoi, Romanian film music, propaganda, „Mitrea Cocor”*

### **1. Social Context**

The film functioned as an instrument of propaganda for the communist regime in 20th-century Romania, as artists and filmmakers of that time were constrained to carry out the artistic act under austere conditions, in which the authorities controlled the directions they were required to follow. The Party's control over Romanian culture extended to all artistic fields; during the first stage of communist consolidation in the 1950s, the priority was the brutal elimination of threats that were difficult to manipulate or influence. However, a compromise solution — offering material benefits and official positions — enabled the regime to recuperate part of the cultural elite. For instance, in literature, figures such as Mihail Sadoveanu, George Călinescu, Camil Petrescu, Cezar Petrescu, Alexandru Rosetti and others continued their activity, though under restricted freedom of

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expression and creativity, being compelled to place their talent in the service of the regime.

A particularly notable figure is Mihail Sadoveanu, highly relevant to this study and essential for understanding the underlying layers of the film *Mitreia Cocor*, which is in fact the adaptation of his novel of the same name. With the publication of *Mitreia Cocor* in 1949, Sadoveanu fully embraced propagandistic prose, expressing his political affinities toward the USSR as early as 1944, including through the well-known phrase "The light comes from the East" (Vasile 2010,16). The novel is the superior stage of the struggle for freedom, essentially depicting the triumph — in Sadoveanu's contemporary time — of generations of fighters from Romania's past (Baconsky 1955, 12). The novel is particularly significant considering that Sadoveanu's epic oeuvre had encompassed, up to that point, all the major events of Romanian history — from the medieval era to the impoverished rural world oppressed by mayors and landowners.

Specialized literary journals of the period also cultivated a sentiment of nostalgia toward the Romanian people, urging them to yearn for the Soviet order. The "artist-citizen" thus gained new responsibilities: to summon the patriotic, democracy-loving citizen toward a new political orientation that promised "a new light pouring from the East." Sadoveanu's newly adopted creed, culminating in *Mitreia Cocor*, had also been reinforced by his journey to Moscow, where he encountered what he perceived as the authentic profile of a new light — one he had long considered foreign and distant. "To this land the writer would later send his beloved hero, Mitrea Cocor, to be educated in the school of socialism and to gather teachings for the future structures of his homeland" (Isac 1955, 21). The ideological foundation that Sadoveanu built in this novel constituted an essential basis for creating a cinematic production, as its subject matter could be adapted and issued through film to all levels of society, especially to the uneducated population, which, due to limited schooling, did not have access to Sadoveanu's novel.

The Romanian feature film industry developed in its early phase under the aegis of propaganda, with narrative subjects drawn from the sphere of socialist ideology. At the same time, these fiction films also offer a radiography of Romanian society of the time; although ideological and propagandistic insertions are often present, one can still observe aspects of everyday life in both urban and rural environments. *Mitreia Cocor* is relevant for analysis because it stands as a pioneering work and belongs to the series of propaganda films produced between 1950 and 1962, in which themes such as the following are highlighted: Collectivization, resisted by kulaks, landowners, and their "henchmen" (*In our Village, Mitrea Cocor, The development, A little incident*); The enthusiastic struggle of youth against nature for Romania's modernization, at the call and under the

guidance of the Party (*The Valley Resounds*, *Ionuț's Brigade*, *The Eruption*); Anti-capitalist and anti-fascist resistance of the illegalist communists and “proto-communists” (*Mitrea Cocor*, *The Bugler's Grandchildren*, *Life Does Not Forgive*, *The Ball*, *The Waves of the Danube*, *The Storm*); The brotherhood in arms between Romania and the Soviet Union (*Mitrea Cocor*, *The Bugler's Grandchildren*, *The Sun Rises*, *Life Does Not Forgive*); Detection and elimination of Western-backed spies, often former members of the old regime, now working for the imperialists and seeking to sabotage technical achievements or steal “miraculous” inventions (*The Valley Resounds*, *Life Wins*, *Ionuț's Brigade*, *Alarm in the Mountains*, *Vultur 101*); The enrichment and corruption of some members of the new leadership, halted in time by honest and responsible communists (*The development*, *Our Director*, *A little incident*); The decadence of the bourgeois-landowning order, whose collapse is represented as inevitable in the face of the new era (*Nepoții gornistului*, *Ciulinii Bărăganului*, *Shattered Citadel*, *Family Jewels*); The failure of individualism compared to collective life and work (*Nufărul roșu*, *Pe răspunderea mea*).

*Mitrea Cocor* premiered on 17 October 1952 in Bucharest, directed by Victor Iliu and Marietta Sadova, as an adaptation of Sadoveanu's novel. Contemporary reviews presented the production as superior to earlier Romanian films, largely due to the directors' ability to ensure unified acting, consistent character development throughout the story, and a balance between dramatic tension and the necessary poetic tone. The film appeared at a time when Romania's interwar cinematic heritage was poor, consisting of only a few productions and primarily three notable directors: Jean Georgescu and Jean Mihail in fiction, and Paul Călinescu in documentary filmmaking. They were later joined by Victor Iliu — a left-leaning intellectual from the period of illegality, an economist by profession, and a cinema enthusiast — and Liviu Ciulei, also culturally formed during the interwar period. Sadova, a lacking experience director, was largely a conjunctural filmmaker of the era. The wife of writer Ion Marin Sadoveanu, she spent the years 1959–1964 in prison due to her former connections with the Legionary Movement.

From the project's inception, the ideological bodies of the Romanian Workers' Party closely supervised the production and intervened with changes to the script, which initially had significant shortcomings. Cast changes were also imposed, with Mitrea Cocor ultimately played by Septimiu Sever instead of Octavian Cosmătă, the original choice. To implement these changes, filming was halted for a period in 1951 (Vasile 2010, 21). After filming concluded, the film had to be submitted by the Committee for Cinematography to the Political Bureau for approval, and the Ideological Section also set a publicity plan, including an article in *Scânteia*. Internationally, within the Soviet Bloc, the film received the “Social Progress Award” at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (Vasile 2010, 21).

The magazine *Flacăra* provides important details regarding the filming process, though these too are veiled by communist propaganda seeking to portray socialism favourably. It is mentioned that the film, made under the direction of Marietta Sadova and Victor Iliu, posed the creative team with a series of exceptionally complex challenges. The diversity of filming locations — thirty exteriors and twenty interiors — required intense resource coordination and rigorous team management. For the first time in Romanian cinema, *Mitrea Cocor* featured large-scale crowd scenes. In the war sequences, the directors organized a veritable army of extras and, with the support of military advisors, coordinated tanks, trucks, aircraft, and explosive effects. To avoid schematic character portrayals and to achieve interpretative authenticity, the preparation process was lengthy and meticulous. The artistic team watched numerous Soviet productions with similar themes and, under the guidance of specialized consultants, studied the physiological evolution of characters at different ages. Preparatory activities also included aesthetic lectures and analyses of debates in the Soviet press regarding Stanislavski's method (Oproiu 1952).

Historical truth is distorted under the umbrella of propaganda, even the academic studies of the time emphasizing that the new generation of filmmakers began their work with a lucid vision of historical events, avoiding the pitfalls of exaggerated romanticism. *Mitrea Cocor* was considered the best example of this approach, at a time when European production was dominated by the myth of the hero; the film distinguished itself through a measured balance, presenting an ostensibly authentic chronicle of the post-war period. Likewise, studies of the era asserted that war played a secondary role in Romanian films: either as a historical backdrop for major events of national significance, or as an environment conducive to triggering extreme situations that precipitate personal drama (Gheorghiu 1973, 202). Thus, it was stated that the war scenes in *Mitrea Cocor* served to show the protagonist the political purpose of the conflict and, after acquiring awareness of the social forces of history, to motivate his active involvement in agrarian reform. War, therefore, functions as a catalyst for social consciousness. From a contemporary perspective, the film indeed illustrates the transformation of socio-political awareness — but at the cost of distorting historical truth, depicting the Soviets in a salvific light.

The homonymous novel was also presented by contemporary criticism as a concrete image of reality in the making: "The novel portrays typical circumstances and characters. Its great merit lies in resolving, in a new way, the relationship between dream and reality" (Grigor, Chișu and Milca 2010, 164). Thus, the film was expected to rise to the novel's level, marking the first complete cinematic representation of the "new man" in Romanian film, adopting the ideas of the

novel. The protagonist, a peasant liberated from bourgeois-landowning oppression, symbolizes the social and moral transformation promoted by the socialist regime. He becomes the model of the citizen dedicated to building a new world in which work, solidarity, and loyalty to the Party define collective identity. The orphaned child, now an adult, finds the courage to stand firmly against bourgeois injustice and fight for equality and socialist ideology.

The concept of the “new man” continued to be exploited throughout the subsequent decades of Romanian cinema, its depiction changing with political shifts. In the 1960s, amid relative distancing from Soviet influence, the “new man” appeared as the young specialist — often an engineer — symbolizing industrialization and scientific-technical progress. After 1971, in the context of the July Theses, cinematography took on a moralizing function, promoting exemplary characters devoted to work and collective spirit. In later decades, the typology diversified, though the propagandistic ideal remained: an individual subordinating personal life to socialist values and the common good.

## **2. *Mitreac Cocor*. The film – Synopsis**

Mitreac Cocor fundamentally represents the tragedy of the Romanian peasant across all historical periods until the establishment of the people's democracy (Grigor, Chișu and Milca 2010, 166). Therefore, it was natural for the film's narrative to reflect, through the protagonist's trajectory, this struggle of oppression endured by Romanian peasants—and not only—against the bourgeois class. All the events that take shape around Mitrea Cocor and the malicious people surrounding him (the landlord, his brother, the army commander, the government) inevitably lead to the conclusion that, once he reaches adulthood, he will desire to fight against the bourgeoisie and support socialism, which is the first system to offer him financial stability and moral support. This class struggle becomes even more striking as the two brothers reach the point where they might commit biblical sins, harming one another in order to obtain the land inherited from their parents.

At the age of 12, following the death of his parents, Mitrea is forced to move in with his brother, the village miller, a stingy man who, instead of helping him continue his schooling, sends him to work for the local landlord in miserable conditions and without any rights. The action on the front—an extensive portion of the narrative—is disorienting, as the German soldiers lack a clear attack plan, causing confusion within Mitrea's military group. The Red Army, however, defeats the German forces, with Romanian soldiers becoming collateral victims; after surrendering unconditionally, the Romanian soldiers receive medical assistance

from the Soviets. Back home, with no trace of compassion, Mitrea's brother spreads false rumors about the conditions in which the prisoners are held. The images in the film contradict him, showing that the Romanians are well fed, housed in spacious rooms, and able to exchange views with their Soviet comrades about the advantages and benefits of socialism. The Romanian soldiers describe the ideal life they have witnessed in Russia: fields with abundant grain, childcare facilities for children and mothers, the great Russian cities, and the advanced factories where every worker earns an honest living. The Romanian prisoners are later integrated visually into the "Tudor Vladimirescu" division—under the portrait of Stalin—an army unit created by the Soviets to purge the Romanian army of officers who refused socialism and Romania's bright future within the Soviet Bloc.

A secondary narrative thread develops the human portrait of Mitrea, through the love he bears for Nastasia. Yet, even this love is overshadowed by the socialist ideal. Mitrea returns home only after completing his socialist mission in the Romanian army, and his primary goal upon return is not love, but the dispossession of the landlord and the recovery of his inherited land. Even the love he declares for his child at the end of the film is placed on the same pedestal as his love for socialism: he dedicates his child's future to the homeland and entrusts him with the responsibility of preserving the ideals for which he fought. Socialist propaganda also manifests through the clear contrast between Mitrea's living conditions before and after the establishment of communism—a contrast highlighted visually: when working for the landlord he wore the same torn clothes regardless of season, which he calls his "uniform," whereas in the socialist Romanian army he wears a uniform that offers him dignity and social status.

The film also serves as a radiography of society at the time, offering important details about daily life. Inversely, the cases presented onscreen can be found in real life, though outside the veil of censorship and propaganda. Ironically, this situation appears within the film's own production team. Director Malvina Urșianu, a major figure in Romanian cinema, recounted how during filming—when she was an assistant director—she found all the belongings from her childhood home in a warehouse containing goods confiscated from nearby boyar estates. Coming from a noble family in the village of Gușoeni, Vâlcea County, she experienced firsthand the communist persecutions and property confiscations. Later, her entire career would be marked by the abusive and restrictive practices of the communist system, and she was even banned from filmmaking for eight years. Regarding *Mitreac Cocor*, she recalled: "When I was assistant director on *Mitreac Cocor*, we filmed in Drăgășani. Much of the action took place at the Brătianu manor, not far from my family's former home. There was also the warehouse with the confiscated goods from the area's manor houses. I remember going inside to

retrieve something for filming, and I was wading through the belongings from our house in Gușoeni—my mother's bedroom, my own room. One day, the wife of the farm director, a kind woman, invited me for coffee. My heart stopped when I recognized, in her home, the embroidered tablecloth made by my mother. I said nothing. At one point, I saw entering the yard a carriage pulled by our horses. I had to remain stone-faced, because two men—strange characters—were watching me the entire time, probably Securitate agents keeping an eye on me (Epure 2019)". Thus, the very subject of the film—presented as a ray of salvation for Romanian society—is in reality the story of a persecuted population, whose personal lives and material goods were seized by the state under the pretext of the "common good."

### 3. Sabin Drăgoi between Concert Music and the Pioneering of Romanian Film Music

Sabin Drăgoi's œuvre, characterized by a distinct artistic language inspired by Romanian ethnographic tradition, occupies an important place in the evolution of modern Romanian music. He composed rhapsodies, divertimenti, folk suites for orchestra, vocal-symphonic and chamber works, numerous piano pieces, as well as vocal and choral compositions. Born in June 1894 in Seliște (Arad County) and passing away on 31 December 1968 in Bucharest, the composer had a remarkable career, holding positions such as professor, director and rector of the Conservatory of Timișoara, director of the Romanian Opera in Cluj, and head of the Institute of Ethnography and Folklore in Bucharest. Within the Union of Composers, he supported the development of a realist orientation in Romanian musical art. Although his creation is rooted in folklore, Drăgoi's value does not lie in the mere appropriation of folk material; his originality stems from the ability to amplify the expressive potential of traditional motifs through elaborated harmonic and polyphonic constructions, demonstrating a complex mastery of compositional techniques.

Among his works are *Năpasta* (1927), *Kir Ianulea* (1937), *Horia* (1945) and *Păcală* (1956), representative for the diversity and depth of his creative output. Of these, *Năpasta* remains the most renowned, establishing him as one of the principal promoters of the national spirit in Romanian music. After its premiere in 1928, the opera was praised for its originality and expressive power, marking Drăgoi as an innovator. Inspired by the drama of Ion Luca Caragiale, the work generated divergent opinions: some critics highlighted its psychological depth and rural authenticity, while others reproached an expressionistic tint deemed unsuitable for the Romanian setting. The music stands out through a modal diatonic melos, simple functional harmonies, and an avoidance of the dramatic

excesses characteristic of post-Wagnerian or impressionist currents. Drăgoi valorizes folk melodies through a refined synthesis between choral tradition and popular spirit, sometimes using leitmotifs and contrapuntal elements inspired by archaic heterophony (Popovici 1974, 17-20). Through a balance between expressivity and simplicity, *Năpasta* becomes a representative work of critical realism in Romanian music. His vision—marked by authenticity, sobriety, and a keen sense of drama—places the opera at the intersection of European tradition and national specificity.

### **3.1. Drăgoi as a film composer: context and challenges**

From the perspective of the film composer, it is essential to understand the context in which Drăgoi wrote the music for *Mitrea Cocor*. Both the novel and the film represent pioneering efforts in Romanian literature and cinema. Early Romanian cinema had a limited interwar legacy and few models to follow, a situation mirrored in the development of film music as well. Drăgoi composed the score for one of the first Romanian feature films, without having many predecessors to guide him. It is difficult to determine whether the directors considered other composers, but selecting Sabin Drăgoi was a natural choice given his prestigious career in art music and the leadership roles he held in major cultural institutions. His activity as a folklorist also made him an ideal connoisseur of the Romanian people and their authentic spirit—central to the subject of *Mitrea Cocor*, which portrays the pure virtues of the Romanian peasant.

An article dedicated to his 80th anniversary highlights his artistic contribution within the new social order. It states that Drăgoi belongs to those composers who lived through the major transformations of the 20th century—from the traumatic experience of the Second World War to the socialist reconstruction of Romania. After 1945, his creative activity intensified, reflecting his adherence to the new social and cultural ideals. As socialist culture consolidated, Drăgoi emerged as one of the representative figures of his generation, showing constant loyalty to the values promoted by the new regime. In his postwar work, one notes an effort to renew musical language through a synthesis between folkloric tradition and the ideological themes of the time. Among his emblematic works are *Imnul muncii* (1945), composed for the 1st of May celebrations, and the symphonic poem *La moartea unei tovarășe căzute în ilegalitate*, dedicated to an antifascist activist and written on the 30th anniversary of the Romanian Communist Party. The cantata *Mai multă lumină* similarly reflects Drăgoi's enthusiasm for electrification and industrialization projects, translating into music the symbolism of light as an emblem of the new era (Românu 1974, 15-16). Thus, the last two decades of

Drăgoi's life represent a period of artistic maturity, in which civic engagement and ideological conviction interweave with authentic creative force, shaping the model of an artist fully integrated into the spirit of his time.

### 3.2. Professional recognition and stylistic compositional features

A valuable source of information is provided by the minutes of the Composers' Union between 1956–1960. These documents offer a coherent image of Drăgoi's professional standing, explicitly demonstrating the esteem he enjoyed among his peers. His works are repeatedly described as "masterfully written," "tastefully harmonized," "precious," and "most welcome." The committees consistently recommended their acquisition, broadcast, or publication—for instance, the *Dixitour* (1956), *20 Carols for Piano* (1957), or *Suite of Folk Dances* (1958). Such recognition confirms his position as a mature composer with solid technique and a well-defined style within the musical landscape of the period (Rotărescu 2020, 253–267).

Some of Drăgoi's style features are: use of folkloric material and popular-inspired themes, treated with structural clarity and expressive simplicity; transparent, finely crafted harmonizations in carols and folk dance suites; a predilection for miniature forms, articulated in small tableaux (*Nunta-n Codru*), with music functioning as a musical illustration of poetic or narrative content; fragmentary structures, sometimes limiting dramatic unity (*Cununa*, *Păcală*); repetitive formulas in certain sections, generating moments of monotony (*Păcală*) (Rotărescu 2020, 35). These traits are essential for understanding how Drăgoi approached film scoring. Without a solid local tradition, he transferred his concert-music techniques directly to cinema. His descriptive, illustrative style—faithful to the poetic or dramatic text—proved naturally adaptable, even if it sometimes produced a fragmented musical structure. But, unlike later Romanian film composers, such as Tiberiu Olah, Drăgoi did not develop strong unifying leitmotifs or deep affective themes. Instead, his score for *Mitrea Cocor* consists of interdependent sound tableaux linked by timbral color, rhythmic unity (sixteenth- and eighth-note ostinati), and intervallic preferences (thirds, fourths, fifths).

These examples from his works belonging to the sphere of concert music serve as essential indicators for understanding the manner in which Sabin Drăgoi approached film music, he being among the first Romanian composers to transition from the concert hall to cinematography. Thus, in the absence of a pre-existing tradition to guide him, the composer approached film music by imprinting upon it the stylistic traits of his concert music. For instance, the inclination toward the illustrative character of music, evident in *Cununa* and *Nunta-n Codru*, is an essential attribute that may be employed in film scoring, given that it is crucial for a

composer to understand the relationship between image and sound. The fact that he faithfully follows the poetic or dramatic text — even when such fidelity leads to a fragmentary construction, as observed in the oratorio *Cununa* — suggests the ability to translate states, situations, and images into music, the descriptive component being fundamental in this domain. In the case of *Nunta-n Codru*, conceived as a succession of tableaux reflecting G. Coșbuc's text, the fragmentation is less pronounced, and the tableau mirroring the content of the verses demonstrates a capacity for adaptation that Drăgoi could have employed in a film score as well: crafting sonic moments tailored to the visual frame, atmosphere, and scenic tension.

The observations of the Union's committee regarding the fragmentary character of certain works, particularly *Cununa*, may serve as a starting point for analyzing Drăgoi's film music. The committee notes that his oratorio consists of "numerous fragments" coherent in themselves yet lacking broad dramatic unity. This fragmentary technique is often found in film music, where the succession of scenes demands rapid shifts of atmosphere, and cohesion is achieved primarily through rhythm, timbre, or a specific sonic color rather than through extensive melodic development. In the score for the film *Mitrea Cocor*, Drăgoi employed such procedures to illustrate various situations — danger, escape, rain, heroism — relying on ostinato rhythmic motifs and suggestive timbral colors, without, however, developing a thematic character. Indeed, the essential element missing from Drăgoi's soundtrack for this film is a strongly unifying theme, a leitmotif capable of capturing the emotional world of the characters and penetrating their inner depths. By contrast, in later cinematic works, composers such as Tiberiu Olah employed unifying melodic themes that themselves became character-themes — extensions of the characters' unspoken emotions, often suppressed by censorship — the music functioning as a bridge between inexpressible human emotion and official ideology (collective enthusiasm, solidarity, the ideal of social transformation).

In this sense, it may be deduced that Drăgoi's musical tableaux for *Mitrea Cocor* function more as interdependent sonic scenes, linked through timbral color, rhythmic unity (repetitive formulas of sixteenth notes and eighth notes), and a preference for intervallic leaps of thirds, fourths, and fifths, rather than through a leitmotif with symbolic value. Another parallel with art music may be drawn from his work *Păcală*, where the Union's observations about the length or monotony of certain sections — such as the recitatives — may resonate with the functioning of certain episodes in film music, where some moments can become repetitive through the reuse of identical rhythmic formulas, yet may lack dramatic depth or a unifying message that would complete the action on screen. This observation does

not diminish the overall quality of his compositions; rather, it reveals a stylistic constant present in both his concert works and his film music: Drăgoi prefers simple, direct, sometimes repetitive structures, effective in illustrating precise images and situations, rather than unifying melodic architectures or leitmotivic constructions that indirectly suggest the inner emotions of characters.

Censorship and ideological directives could provide the main explanation for why the composer did not cultivate an affective direction in his music, the principal purpose being the glorification of socialism. Examining the early film scores of other contemporaries, one may observe that their first productions also adopted a primarily illustrative musical character, without extensive exploration of the psychological universe of the characters. Thus, it may be assumed that a period of adaptation to this new domain was necessary — a period acquired through work on multiple productions. In Drăgoi's case, his cinematic career was brief, as he composed music for only this single film; therefore, the time in which he might have further explored the specific demands of cinematography was lacking. Nonetheless, he followed several established film-music patterns, beyond those already mentioned, attempting also to illustrate the secondary layer of the plot — namely, the love between Mitrea and Nastasia. He conveyed emotional nuances through melodic lyricism and timbral combinations, yet the musical tableaux are not interconnected through profound thematic unity or leitmotivic coherence that would enable the musical unfolding of the lovers' story.

Taken as a whole, the documents of the Union of Composers outline the image of a respected, rigorous composer, deeply connected to folklore, with a pronounced inclination toward the variational principle, Baroque forms, descriptive music, and the illustrative miniature. All these traits facilitated his adaptation to the cinematic idiom, in which fragmentation, timbral suggestion, and the inner rhythm of the image are structural elements of the sonic discourse. The challenges faced by the composer were all the greater considering that, in addition to propaganda requirements, the period was one of stylistic exploration for Romanian cinema, Drăgoi being among the pioneers discovering the foundations of Romanian film music and opening new possibilities for younger colleagues.

The music for the film *Mitrea Cocor* later inspired the orchestral suite *Mitrea Cocor*, which distinguished itself at the time through its programmatic character and its capacity to integrate the socialist-realist vision into a personal and expressive musical language. However, no information regarding this orchestral suite appears in the minutes of the Union of Composers; for now, the only source mentioning it is an article dedicated to the 80th anniversary of his birth (Românu 1974, 15-16). The information preserved in the Union's minutes provides important clues regarding his status within the organization, as well as regarding his

compositions and the stylistic approach he pursued throughout his life. A passing reference to the film music for *Mitreia Cocor* appears in the minutes dated 3 November 1952, during the meeting of the Commission for the Supervision of Symphonic Music, where, after detailed review, the music for the film was proposed to be presented to the Union's Bureau, together with other works: *Piano Concerto* by Nina Cassian; *Four Symphonic Dances* by Leon Klepper; *Symphony in E* by George Enacovici. No subsequent information is provided regarding the decisions taken by the Bureau. The procedure for film music, however, required composers to work directly with the cinematographic studios, the studios holding the rights to the soundtrack, which meant that the score did not have to pass through the evaluation of the Union's committees.

#### **4. Functions, Symbols, and Compositional Patterns in the Music of *Mitreia Cocor***

The music of *Mitreia Cocor* occupies a significant place in early socialist-era Romanian cinema, forming a sonic discourse in which narrative intentions, ideological rhetoric, and dramatic expressivity are subsumed under the aesthetic ideals characteristic of the period. An analysis of the score and its use in relation to the images reveals, at first glance, a rigorous compositional mindset, with clearly defined placements of musical tableaux, as indicated in the composer's manuscript notes. Selective accompaniment strategies generate a trajectory in which music functions both as an ideological tool and as illustrative support for the visual imagery, while also providing a subtle emotional underpinning for scenes charged with symbolic affect. The analysis of the film's soundtrack follows a methodology centered on both the dramaturgical functionality of music and its relationship to the ideological context of early socialist Romanian cinema. This approach applies film-music criteria such as identifying musical functions in relation to image, analyzing recurring motifs, distinguishing between diegetic and nondiegetic music, and examining how sonic structures support the narrative and ideological construction. In this study, we will examine several characteristic features of Sabin Drăgoi's compositional style as adapted for film music. This represents only a first portion of the broader research dedicated to the music of the film *Mitreia Cocor*, as a comprehensive analysis of the musical language in all significant sonic moments not included in this material—such as the war scenes and the diegetic songs—will be addressed in future studies and research, these aspects likewise requiring detailed and in-depth attention.

The composer's manuscript reveals a high degree of precision in establishing and maintaining the placement of musical tableaux. His annotations show that he

firmly accepts or rejects modifications, indicating that the musical plan was conceived strictly according to the script and image. This strategy reinforces dramaturgical coherence and suggests that Drăgoi understood music as a structural element, not merely ornamental. However, discrepancies appear between the manuscript and the final film regarding the placement of musical moments. Certain sections are absent from the soundtrack—such as the leitmotif of the landlord Cristea, which was meant to first appear in the scene “Are you still hitting the stallion?” and recur with each of the landlord’s on-screen appearances. Another motif that Drăgoi thought important is the one associated with the miller—Mitrea’s brother—who receives an entire musical tableau in the score. Yet the character is not accompanied by this motif in the film, nor by any musical material whatsoever. Despite the precise division of the score into segments tied to specific film moments, the final production does not consistently follow Drăgoi’s intended placement, likely due to editing, censorship, or last-minute directorial decisions during recording.

#### **4.1. Music and propaganda: emotional conditioning through sound and Symbolism through timbre and musical gesture**

Drăgoi composed for a film in which propaganda permeates every social, emotional, and ideological layer of the imagery. The atmosphere—marked by the deep poverty of the Romanian village—is intertwined with personal experiences recognizable to many viewers. For example, the scene of the memorial ritual with the parents’ portraits on the wall (minute 6) constitutes a traditional visual leitmotif, familiar from real life. Such emotionally loaded contexts form an ideal foundation for the political message conveyed by the film. Music deepens this emotional register through intimate lyricism evoked by doina-like melodic lines, amplifying the somber gravity of the “old social world” and preparing the ground for the socialist promise. Another propagandistic instrument appears in the critique and even demonization of religious faith. In the scene at minute 11:05, the sister-in-law’s prayer to God is juxtaposed with her immoral intentions to drive Mitrea away, casting doubt on her moral integrity. This creates an ideal backdrop for the lyricism that underscores Mitrea’s subsequent struggles.

Visually, the film contrasts Mitrea’s tattered clothing while serving the landlord with his clean and dignified uniform in the socialist army, symbolizing the transition from oppression to emancipation. Later, the film juxtaposes the glorification of the Soviet Union (military parade) with Mitrea and Nastasia’s emotional reunion at the train station; the montage equates socialist ideals with personal fulfilment, assigning music the role of ideological mediator.

Music reinforces real-life emotional references to serve socialist rhetoric. In a scene where a character recounts a tragic personal event, the music conveys his inner pain. Drăgoi uses warm timbres—flute and string quartet—in a lyrical tableau in D minor, where the flute's modal doina-like melody evokes the sound of the Romanian shepherd's pipe, supported by the harmonic foundation of the strings. D minor, which already appears in the film's opening, functions as Drăgoi's tonal emblem or preference for vulnerability, suffering, and purity. The transparent harmony, with occasional chromatic touches, reflects the simplicity and depth of the Romanian spirit subjugated by hardship. The scene serves a dual purpose: to motivate Mitrea to embrace his role as the “new man,” and to plant in the audience's subconscious a sense of collective complicity in the political tragedies of the past.

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Fig.1. *Tragedy story* [manuscript].

#### 4.2. The generating cells of the sound material – the relationship between the theme of love with its expressive limitations and the motif of slavery, the central point of propaganda

The love story between Mitrea and Nastasia—although present throughout the film—does not serve as the musical axis of the score. Drăgoi introduces a sonic tableau dedicated to the couple, but it remains modest in melodic personality and lacks broader motivic development. This absence can be explained by the aesthetic priorities of the era, in which the construction of the “new man” outweighed interpersonal relationships, and by the narrative structure, where Mitrea’s social and political evolution dominates his emotional one.

Nevertheless, scenes featuring the couple are consistently accompanied by a diaphanous atmosphere created by harp and flute (e.g., minute 55:06 or the Bușteni train-station scene at 1:23:19). These timbral choices suggest a dreamlike inner world distinct from the oppressive social reality. Still, the coherence of the love music episodes remains weak, reinforcing their secondary status.

A short melodic theme expressing longing and intimacy appears when Nastasia reads Mitrea’s letter announcing his return (minute 1:30:08). The melody follows Drăgoi’s preferred modal anhemitonic pentatonic framework, with stepwise movement in thirds and major seconds, and with typical leaps of fourths and fifths.



Fig. 2. *Melodic theme Violin 1 – lullaby – Nastasia reads the letter from Mitrea, [manuscript, page 61].*



Fig. 3. *Melodic theme Clarinet in A – Nastasia meets Mitrea in the park before going to war, [manuscript, bars 2-6, page 39].*

Another theme—named the “market of servitude”—illustrates the same melodic patterns: ascending and descending thirds, followed by major seconds, and alternating fourths and fifths. Usually, the composer places the thematic structure at the beginning of a musical moment, then transferr it to another instrument (often clarinet, flute, or violins), creating a dialogue through timbral shifts. Rhythmic augmentation and thickening of accompaniment later transform the theme into a harmonic-textural mass in which the original motif becomes partially obscured. This procedure makes leitmotif recognition difficult for the audience, shifting associative meaning from thematic identity to timbral color or lyrical character.

These recurring intervallic leaps constitute the generative cells of the film’s musical material. The “servitude motif” reappears during key stages of Mitrea’s development—his first arrival at the landlord’s estate, after seven years of labor, and in other contexts suggesting social stagnation (e.g., minutes 11:08, 12:38, 13:48). The motif is adapted timbrally and rhythmically: in childhood it is assigned to violins in a high register, indicating fragility; in adulthood it drops to the middle register with a calmer tempo. In the accident-at-the-press scene (15:38), the same cell marks the narrative shift, signifying the precarious condition of rural workers before socialist transformation. Interestingly, the motif also appears at the beginning of Mitrea and Nastasia’s early encounters, suggesting both their emotional continuity and their shared social conditioning.



Fig. 4. Violin I – Melodic theme from the scene named *Slave Market*, [manuscript, page 21].

Throughout the film, besides the motif of servitude, we can also identify other thematic correspondences and variations. A series of melodic ideas are borrowed and adapted in different contexts, establishing subtle bridges between scenes. For example, there are motivic similarities between the train station scene (Mitrea and Nastasia) and the sequence in which Nastasia receives Mitrea's letter. Additionally, another musical idea is reused both in the scene with the book depicting the Soviet Union and at 14:14, when Mitrea is still working for the boyar after seven years—a parallelism that suggests the dialectic between oppression and the emerging political ideal.

#### 4.3. Absence of music in dialogue scenes

A notable characteristic of the score is the almost systematic exclusion of music from most dialogue scenes. This practice reflects a realist orientation, in which verbal discourse must remain unaltered, while music intervenes only in moments that are narratively meaningful, illustrative, or symbolically charged. The score thus emphasizes key emotional or ideological transformations, without overburdening the spoken text. Drăgoi consciously avoids saturating dialogue with emotional underscore, opting instead for punctual, functional use of music.

#### 4.4. Musical symbols and stylistic Influences

Numerous scenes in the film are articulated through implicit sonic meanings, with the composer using timbral color as his primary technique. For instance, the tuba in its lowest register, accompanying the collapse of the bridge, introduces a descending line reminiscent of a funeral march, evoking the downfall of a world and foreshadowing death. Scenes such as the parents' death (minute 05:25) employ dissonant horn chords to highlight psychological tension and the tragic dimension of the event, concluding the storm sequence with a sense of hopelessness.



Fig. 5. Conclusion to the death of Mitrea's parents - Dissonant chords played on Horns in F (1,2,3,4), [manuscript, page 20] Horns are not transposed.

Danger and tension are represented through equally concise musical cues—for example, the contrabass in its lowest register when the young Mitrea, after his parents' memorial service, confronts his brother who becomes verbally and physically abusive. Here too, Drăgoi maintains his preference for intervallic leaps of fourths and fifths.



Fig.6. The Mitrea child threatens his brother after the funeral, [manuscript, page 20]

#### 4.5. Folklore as a structural and expressive source

Folklore serves as a fundamental source of inspiration for Drăgoi's entire creation, and the score for *Mitrea Cocor* makes no exception. For instance, in the scene at minute 47:46—where the landlord and the commander distribute mobilization orders—the melodic line is doina-like, stylistically close to traditional Romanian folk music. The choice is justified by the rural setting and the authenticity required by such scenes.

However, across the film Drăgoi does not maintain a constant proximity to authentic folk language. The score frequently reveals an orchestral idiom influenced by the Baroque—an influence filtered through modern symphonic

sensitivity. This aesthetic is not uncommon in early socialist cinema and reflects the eclecticism of that formative period.

#### 4.6. Diegetic Music

The film incorporates several diegetic musical moments (Nastasia's song of longing, *Covătīca*, *Tara arde*, *țara gême*). However, imperfect lip-synchronization and the characters' implausibly high level of musical skill reduce the realism of these scenes. Their function is primarily symbolic rather than realistic: they mark the characters' belonging to an idealized popular culture and facilitate transitions into nondiegetic music, which clarifies emotional or ideological meaning. Thus, diegetic music functions as a rhetorical device, common in propaganda productions of the era, underscoring collectivism or highlighting generalized emotional states.

#### 4.7. Short, suggestive Musical inserts

In the early passages featuring Mitrea as a child, two brief musical inserts illustrate the emotional atmosphere: one shows Mitrea in the landlord's wheat field, gazing dreamily into the distance; the other depicts Mitrea and Nastasia playing together. A lyrical melodic phrase played by the B-flat clarinet (though notated in A clarinet in the score) conveys the boy's inner calm in the wheat-field scene. The structure is modal, based on an anhemitonic pentatonic scale and constructed with Drăgoi's characteristic intervallic gestures—leaps of fourths and fifths and ascending/descending motion in thirds. Likewise, childhood innocence is rendered through eight measures built on a playful motif—leaps of thirds and fourths—exchanged between oboe and flute against a subtle violin accompaniment in A minor.

Allegretto giocoso  $\text{♩} = 120$

The musical score consists of five staves. The top staff is for Flute, the second for Oboe, the third for Violin I, the fourth for Violin II, and the bottom for Viola. The Flute and Oboe parts are prominent, with the Flute playing a melodic line of eighth-note pairs and the Oboe providing harmonic support. The Violin I, Violin II, and Viola parts are mostly harmonic, with sustained notes and eighth-note patterns. The score is in 3/8 time. The key signature is A minor. The tempo is Allegretto giocoso, with a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = 120$ .

Fig. 7. *Children's Play: Nastasia and Mitrea*, [manuscript, page 14].



Fig. 8. Clarinet in B – Mitrea in the boyar's wheat – the clarinet is not transposed, [manuscript, page 14].

## 5. The Opening Credits – The Introductory Tableau That Sets the Film's Atmosphere

The opening credits represent an extended musical tableau, which simultaneously sets the atmosphere of the film and establishes the stylistic musical character used. The credits consist of multiple sections, with variations in tempo (moderato, andante, grandioso) and changes in meter (4/4, 12/8, 4/4). The meter change in the second section, indicated beforehand at the end of the first section by the markings *sempre crescendo* and *ritardando*, signals the emergence of a more lyrical new section. Rhythmically, it is predominantly constructed with short note values such as eighths and sixteenths, particularly in the violin accompaniment, creating a continuous inner movement, further sustained by the frequent presence of triplets in the wind instruments.

Two melodic thematic structures stand out: in the first section, supported by violins and flutes, and in the final section, by flutes, both following a similar melodic pattern—a gradual melodic motion along the main degrees of the tonality, gravitating around the tonic, with a preference for intervals of a third, fourth, and fifth, without large leaps. The widest interval leap in the first section is a fifth, while in the second section it is an octave.

The orchestra includes the following instruments: Flute (1,2), Oboe (1,2), Clarinet in B (1,2), Bassoon (1,2), Horn in F (1–4), Trumpet in C (1,2), Trombone (1,2, bass), Tuba, Timpani, Harp, Violin (1,2), Viola, Cello, Double Bass. The horns and trumpets frequently play short rhythmic signals in the introduction, based on triplets, producing a heroic effect. The initial harmony is discreetly supported by cello and double bass, which alternate throughout the credits from long notes to signal-like interventions in the low register, employing triplets.

Harmonically, the composer uses progressions along the main scale degrees, with rare modulations to E major, frequent F# accidentals, diminished chords on  $\#iv^\circ$  and  $ii^\circ$ , and pedal points on D in the cello and double bass. Harmonic oscillations between the i–iv–V–V–i degrees are usually achieved through

staggered entrances of the instruments. The credits maintain a predominantly homophonic character, with chords supported by winds and strings, occasionally including canon-like passages where melodic lines overlap or complement each other between winds and strings.

There is a cyclical nature in the musical discourse of the credits—it begins in D minor at *moderato* tempo and culminates in *grandioso* in D major. This can symbolically reflect the journey of the main character, who starts vulnerable in childhood and reaches maturity, master of his actions, ready to act in service of socialism. In fact, the *Grandioso* section also represents the sense of power and grandeur instilled by socialism in the Romanian people, as well as Mitrea's triumph over the boyar at the film's conclusion.

Within the credits, the composer combines two universes: that of triumph and the army, represented by the brass with dotted rhythms and triplets as a dialogue for the main melodic line, and that of Romanian folklore, echoed in the sound of flutes which reproduce a folkloric melody. While earlier sections of the credits include canon writing among flutes, clarinets, and violins, in this *Grandioso*, the composer assigns the melody to a single instrument, overlaying it with two qualities: a reverie conveyed by the harp's figurative arpeggios, and agitation represented by the violin I's persistent sixteenth-note rhythmic figures.

Throughout the credits, the tonalities transition through D minor, B minor, D minor, and D major, yet the harmonic language remains clear and tonal, without modulations, with the canon writing subtly leading towards Baroque forms. Highlighting multiple timbres parallels the distinct voices of the characters. For example, the credits begin in the low register, with ascending passages of cello and double bass, musically representing the voice of the boyar, Mitrea's brother, and those representing power at the film's opening. This power was based on unequal rights, justifying the minor tonality of the introduction. However, the *sempre crescendo* marking and the shift from *mezzo-forte* to *forte* also reflect a change in the balance of power, with the people gaining ground against the bourgeoisie.

The confused and oppressed voices of the Romanian peasants are expressed through woodwind instruments, in sections where brass and low strings are absent, allowing the people's voices to prevail. Another notable structure in the introduction is the brass, featuring heroic and military interventions by the trumpets in C, corresponding to the influence of socialism entering the lives of the Romanian people, ultimately victorious in the film.

## 6. Conclusions

This study highlights that *Mitrea Cocor* represents a defining moment in the development of Romanian cinema during the early socialist era, being a cultural product in which literature, film, and music are subordinated to a broad ideological project. An analysis of the historical context demonstrates the profound way in which the political directions of the communist regime influenced Romanian art, transforming the film into a propaganda tool intended to glorify the “new man,” the Romanian-Soviet alliance, and the definitive break from the bourgeoisie-landowner world. Within this framework, the film functions as a narrative construction that rearranges history, emotion, and traditional symbols in support of socialist realism, thus filtering both collective memory and individual experiences.

Sabin Drăgoi’s contribution to this cinematic project reveals the tension between a musical language rooted in tradition and the demands of a field still in formation. Although the composer possessed solid experience in the realm of art music and an authentic mastery of folk melodies, the lack of a native film music tradition, ideological constraints, and the illustrative character imposed by the aesthetics of the era resulted in a score dominated by sound miniatures, repetitive motifs, independent tableaux, and a discourse that is functional rather than deeply affective. The absence of a defining leitmotif or extensive thematic development confirms both the contingent status of the music in relation to the propagandistic discourse and the composer’s preferential orientation toward timbral description and programmatic character.

Nevertheless, Drăgoi’s music faithfully reflects the aesthetic line of the period and contributes to the symbolic articulation of the film: timbral coloring, the invocation of folklore, the preference for constant intervallic formulas, and the alternation of registers signify not only sonic constructions but also narrative mechanisms through which the viewer is guided emotionally and ideologically. The soundtrack thus becomes a bridge between the traditional rural world, often presented in an idealized manner, and the new socialist reality, invested with the meaning of a necessary and inevitable transformation.

Overall, the film *Mitrea Cocor* and its music illustrate the difficult beginnings of Romanian cinema after 1948, marked by a balance between artistic expression and political obedience. Sabin Drăgoi’s score, although lacking the thematic cohesion characteristic of later major cinematic works, has historical and aesthetic value, documenting a pioneering moment in which the musical language of

Romanian film was beginning to take shape. In this light, the study constitutes an important testimony to how composers, directors, and filmmakers of that era attempted to merge their own artistic universe with the imperatives of a system that claimed total control over culture. The present study demonstrates that, beyond the imposed limitations, Sabin Drăgoi's music contributes to the understanding of an essential moment in Romanian cultural history, in which the evolution of art was closely tied to the political and social transformations of the period.

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