

An exceptional meeting at the Black Church: Emilia Petrescu and Hans Eckart Schlandt

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Abstract: *In the communist era, in Romania, two destinies of musicians meet in a collaboration that has marked for some decades an artistic friendship and exceptional musical achievements. Their careers developed in the context in which sacred music was carefully censored by the communist political system and the two artists precisely targeted this repertoire. Who were they, how they made their musical projects possible and what their artistic heritage is - we intend to draw in the following lines. The present article is based on extensive documentation, but mainly on a recent interview with the organist Eckart Schlandt. The author of this article had the privilege of interact directly with the two artists.*

Key-words: *sacred music, romanian musicians, career, communist era*

1. Emilia Petrescu (1925-2003)

Asking my students recently about Emilia Petrescu's name, I was surprised to find that most of them did not know who she is and what she meant for the recent music history of Romania. And yet only 16 years separates us from the moment when the artist left this world. It is true that she had retired from the artistic life more than three decades ago, but in recent history this time is still very little. How is it possible that in the singing specialized environment, names like Emilia Petrescu, Mariana Stoica, Vasile Moldoveanu, Lucia Stănescu and many others are so little known? Does it have to do with the precarious interest of the authorities for national values, or with the increasing indifference of Romanians to classical music and their own cultural values?

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Five years ago, in Bucharest was published the monography entitled “Emilia Petrescu – Queen of the Concert singing”, signed by the musicologist Grigore Constantinescu. Along with a few interviews with Emilia Petrescu (published in the press of her time) and the recordings she made (most in LP format), this book is the main landmark in knowing the personality and career of the artist, for those who did not have the privilege to listen her on stage or to know her personally. I met Mrs. Emilia Petrescu when I was young student and I studied for a year with her, in 1997. At that time she had already withdrawn from the stage but she still continued to teach private singing lessons. Emilia Petrescu was an elegant lady, possessing in the same time a great sense of humor and a disarming natural behavior. As a teacher she was always very careful and rigorous. Her voice was intact in the late years and all the exemplifications she made kept an impressive accuracy of emission and intonation.

The soprano Emilia Petrescu was born in Romania in the beautiful interwar period, in 1925. She formed her intellectual and artistic personality in the years of World War II and later make most of her lyrical career in the communist era². She graduated The Philosophy University and later the Royal Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Art, in Bucharest. This double philosophical and musical formation helped her in her career, as the artist herself declared: *“Since my student years I have intensely studied foreign languages, aesthetics and art history. In this way I learned to get into the essence of a certain style, because only the connection with the other arts, such as architecture, painting or literature, allows you to really know the particularities of the different cultural spheres. Only this connection makes possible an authentic interpretation. It is not always possible to sing an English song, a French melody or a German lied, even if they are of the same stylistic era. It is not easy to distinguish these specific shades, without talking about the linguistic features.”*³

Among her musical mentors, Emilia Petrescu named tenor Aurel Alexandrescu, harpsichordist Kurt Mild and conductor Constantin Silvestri. Silvestri founded the famous vocal Quartet of the Bucharest Philharmonic in 1950, of which Emilia Petrescu was a member, together with the mezzosoprano Elena Cernei (later Martha Kesler), the tenor Aurel Alexandrescu and the bass Alexandru Voinescu. In an interview from the year 1968, Emilia Petrescu said: *“Sibiu and Braşov have become the cities in which I was most fond of singing. I would not have been able to*

² Cristina Radu, “Organistul Hans Eckart Schlandt despre colaborarea sa cu soprana Emilia Petrescu”, the complete interview published on internet in 4.07.2019

³ Grigore Constantinescu “Emilia Petrescu – Regina cântului vocal concertant”, pag.295

*fully cope with composers like Bach and Händel without perfecting the technique with Aurel Alexandrescu in Bucharest, Viktor Bickerich in Brasov and Franz Xavier Dressler in Sibiu. But most consistently I worked with Kurt Mild, with whom I was learning to master, step by step, each musical work, both from the point of view of the musical content and the musical technique.”*⁴ Emilia Petrescu made her lyrical debut in 1948 in Beethoven's 9th Symphony, her career specializing later in chamber and vocal-symphonic repertoire. She possessed a metallic voice, with an extended ambitus and a brilliant emission, of great intonational and interpretive accuracy. Her artistic versatility has taken many forms, the soprano approaching an extended repertoire, from baroque to contemporary music, as well as various genres, such as lied, cantata, oratory, concert repertoire and some opera works. Her scenic presence was elegant and calm⁵.

She performed a large number of concerts in Bucharest and on tours in the country and in Europe. Although during the communist regime the artists had great difficulty leaving the country and it was not possible to move freely as nowadays, Emilia Petrescu has been internationally recognized. She has been consistently appreciated and invited to prestigious festivals in Germany (seven consecutive editions of the famous Händel-Festspiele in Göttingen!). She has collaborated with leading artists of her time, among whom we selectively the singers Dietrich Fischer Dieskau, Theo Adam, Peter Schreier, Konrad Almen, Karl Vaterlre, the organist Hans Eckart Schlandt, the conductors Constantin Silvestri, Erich Bergel, George Georgescu, Iosif Conta, Herbert Kegel, Igor Markevitch, Paul Kletzky, Pierre Boulez. She made an important discography.

Emilia Petrescu was also a renowned teacher in Romania⁶, USA (Ohio, 1972) and Turkey (Ankara 1985-1989) and has been a member of the juries in international singing competitions.

⁴ Gr.Constantinescu, *op.cit.*, pag.309

⁵ “Tall, elegant, calm, looking at the audience with a friendly smile from the moment she entered on the stage, and then ... how many wonderful moments of true art, produced by the crystalline purity of her voice, by her talent to shape and build each song, section, phrase from the songs sung.” (Musicologist Olguța Grigorescu, quoted by Constantinescu, pag.326-327)

⁶ She taught the Lied and Oratory disciplines for many years at the Conservatory of Music in Bucharest. However, in an interview from 2013 the composer and musicologist Doru Popovici shed light on some of the artist's most difficult moments in the didactic career: “The life of Emilia Petrescu has unfolded between the sublime and the horrible. The sublime constituted her art, and the hideousness is linked to many offenses brought to her by the coalition of mediocrities. In this sense, a notable case is when Arta Florescu excluded her from the suite of singing teachers from the Bucharest Conservatory. However, later, due to some communists more open minded, like Stefan Andrei, Pompiliu Macovei, Paul Niculescu-Mizil, she was reintegrated as a singing teacher, at the same institute.” (Gr.Constantinescu, *op.cit.*, pag.351)

Awards in Romania, Germany and the US have crowned the artist's career. In 1954 the state council of the Romanian People's Republic, headed by the communist leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, conferred the title of Emerging Artist; in 1969 she received the Golden Duchy, offered by the University of Göttingen, Germany. Since 1970 she has been appointed honorary member of the Heinrich Schütz Society of RFG. In 1974 Balwin Wallace Cleveland University in the USA granted her the title of honorary member and in 1994 the Gheorghe Dima Music Academy in Cluj-Napoca Emilia Petrescu received the title of Doctor Honoris Causa.

She died in 2003. In 2015 a book of "monographic research - portrait" signed by Grigore Constantinescu was published in Bucharest in order to commemorate the artistic personality of the soprano Emilia Petrescu.

2. Hans Eckart Schlandt (born in 1940)

The organist Hans Eckart Schlandt was born in Kronstadt⁷ in 1940 in a Transylvanian Saxon family (German: Siebenbürger Sachsen) whose name has become synonymous with a highest quality musical tradition⁸. He worked for almost five decades as organist and cantor of the Black Church, conductor of the Bach Choir and founder of the Bach Youth Choir (*Jugendbachchors*).

His musical training began in childhood, taking piano lessons from his father, Walter Schlandt (pianist, music teacher and choir conductor). Later, from the age of 14, Eckart dedicated himself to the study of the organ, under the guidance of Victor Bickerich. His musical development was strongly influenced by his master, Bickerich⁹ – who was for four decades the main organist of the Black Church, and who founded the famous summer Organ Season and the Bach Choir.

In 1957 Hans Eckart Schlandt went to Bucharest to join the "Ciprian Porumbescu" Music Conservatory, in the organ class led by Helmut Plattner. In 1962, Eckart Schlandt graduated from the Conservatory of Bucharest and returned

⁷ Kronstadt is the German name for Brasov, the mountain town in the heart of Romania which between 1950 and 1960 was called "Oraşul Stalin" in order to emphasize the cult of personality of the Russian socialist leader Iosif Visarionovici Stalin (see Wikipedia, Oraşul Stalin)

⁸ Radu, *op.cit*

⁹ Even before Victor Bickerich's arrival in Kronstadt (in 1922) "there was a lively musical life in the city, but what was missing was Bach's music. Bickerich managed to resolve this by conducting the first performance here of the *Matthäus-Passion* oratory in 1924 and subsequently the first performance with *Johannes-Passion*" – says Eckart Schlandt in an article published in 2013 by Christine Chiriac, *Ein offenes Haus für Leute, die gerne singen- Kronstädter Bachchor feiert runden Geburtstag*

to Brasov where he was employed as a music teacher. Also in 1962, his father, Walter Schlandt succeeded Victor Bickerich at the Black Church, under his leadership being initiated new musical projects, with known soloists, although the orchestra was now composed mainly of amateur musicians, following the tensions generated by the communist "Process from The Black Church", which also affected the musical activities. In 1965, Hans Eckart Schlandt took over from his father the musical duties in the Black Church: he has become the main organist and the conductor of the Bach Choir.

He had the chance to play and develop his technique and registration's fantasy on a spectacular instrument: the great organ of the Black Church, the work of Berlin architect Carl August Buchholz. Built between 1836 and 1839, directly in the church, its functions are mechanically activated, according to the *Schleifladen* principle; the organ of the Black Church celebrates this year 180 years after the inauguration! The instrument has 63 sound registers and no less than 3993 tubes, divided into 4 manuals and pedalboard. It is extremely versatile and able to cover the sounds of a vast musical repertoire, from the baroque to the modern era. Starting with 1953, organ recitals are played annually from July to August - under the motto "*Soli Deo Gloria*" in a festival inaugurated by Victor Bickerich and continued until now by the organists Hans Eckart Schlandt and Steffen Schlandt, as well as other reputed names of international and national organists, who are invited to perform in Brasov¹⁰. There are numerous recordings made by the organist in the Black Church on the Buchholz organ, which have remained interpretative landmarks. Although during the Communist period the authorities are openly opposed to religious music, Eckart Schlandt manages to present with amazing continuity and quality the great oratories and passions of Bach, Mozart, Brahms transforming the Black Church into a musical haven¹¹ for the Saxon community but also for the Braşov public and the numerous tourists who visited the city at the foot of the Tâmpa mountain. After the Revolution from 1989, at the beginning of the nineties, a new impasse in the activity of the Bach Choir came through, because most of the members of the choir emigrated then from Romania to West-European countries. However, he succeeds in restarting this choral

¹⁰ Information from the presentation of the disc "*Hans Eckart Schlandt la orga Bisericii Negre din Braşov, Buxtehude-Pachelbel, Brahms, J.S.Bach*" LP Electrecord Seria *Orgi istorice din România*, ST-ECE 01042

¹¹ ***Hans Eckart Schlandt, Wikipedia.

ensemble and in 1993 he founded the Bach Youth Choir (*Jugendbachchors*)¹². In addition to his intense activity at the Black Church, over the years the organist Hans Eckart Schlandt had performed in different cities in the country, as well as in several European countries¹³ (Holland, RFG, RDG, USSR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia) and later in the USA. Eckart Schlandt also devoted himself to a rich pedagogical activity: between 1993 and 2004 he taught organ and chamber music at the Faculty of Music from "Transilvania" University of Braşov, and between 1992 and 1999 he taught master's courses. Numerous recordings, awards and awards crown the career of Hans-Eckart Schlandt, and perhaps one of the most profound achievements is that his son, Steffen Markus Schlandt, continues the family tradition, being a wonderful musician, organist and conductor, further the elite artistic mission of the Black Church. Since 2004, Steffen Schlandt has taken over the leadership and preparation of both Bach choirs. Currently, Hans Eckart Schlandt is coordinating the summer organ season, with his son, the organist Steffen Schlandt and is giving concerts.

3. The artists' musical collaboration

The political background of the years in which the two artists collaborated in Romania was the communist regime, with its pronounced atheist visions. Baritone Ionel Pantea recalled in an interview: "In those years of dictatorship of the proletariat, the so-called religious music was not well seen (heard) by the communists, so the repertoire of vocal-symphonic concert was quite limited. Titles with profane resonance, such as the oratory "Alexander Fest" or "Acis and Galatea" or "Struggle between Phoebus and Pan", "The Seasons" by Haydn and of course the 9th Symphony by Beethoven, were preferred. But a safe haven and uncontrolled by the authorities was the Black Church in Braşov, where the eminent organist and conductor Eckart Schlandt, organized concerts of "forbidden music" annually, to which Emilia Petrescu and I participated constantly. In the repertoire were "Johannes Passion", "Messias", "Ein deutsches Requiem"¹⁴

¹² Christine Chiriac, *Glückwunsch zum Siebzigsten!*/ Karpaten Rundschau

¹³ "Schlandt has performed in different cities in the country, as well as in several European countries. It is noted by a sober technique and by fantasy in the registration" (excerpt from the presentation of the disc "Hans Eckart Schlandt at the organ of the Black Church in Brasov", *op.cit*)

¹⁴ Constantinescu, *op.cit.*, pag.315-316

Eckart Schlandt met Emilia Petrescu and admired her in numerous concerts in Bucharest, during his student years, and later in Brasov, from 1956 when the soprano was invited to sing at the Black Church, after she was recommended by the harpsichordist Nicolae Rădulescu¹⁵. When Eckart Schlandt took over the responsibilities as organist and choir conductor at the Black Church, the collaboration of the two artists was constant for almost two decades (between 1964 and 1984). It should be mentioned that in those years the Saxons of Brasov went through a difficult period under the communist regime. In 1958, the priest of the Evangelical Church, Dr. Konrad Möckel, was arrested along with other Brasov intellectuals¹⁶, accused and convicted of "activities against the state" in the so-called "Black Church trial" - in fact, a Security¹⁷ staging in order to intimidate the community of the Saxony and make them more obedient to the communist regime. These tensions profoundly affected the musical activities of the Black Church. The Bach Choir stopped its activity for several months¹⁸ and the orchestra also suffered, because between 1949-1956 and 1958-1965, the members of the Philharmonic Orchestra were forbidden to participate in musical activities in the church (!) and the choir was forced to sing without orchestra, the only instrument allowed being the organ¹⁹. "In these circumstances, the important contribution of

¹⁵ "Thanks to the intercession of the harpsichordist and pianist Nicolae Rădulescu, Emilia Petrescu was invited to the Black Church in Brasov, a cradle of baroque sacred art, in 1956, during difficult years of communism, who restricted the genre." Costin Popa, *An opera blog*

¹⁶ "In 1958 the priest Dr. Konrad Möckel, the epitrop Guido Fritz and the engineer Fritz Roth were arrested. They, along with a few other people, were officially charged and convicted for "anti-state activities" in the so-called "Black Church Trial." (Gernot Nussbächer, *Black Church of Braşov - historical retrospective*)

¹⁷ "The so-called Security of State built its key role in a political process, which communist propaganda labeled "The Black Church Trial" (Procesul de la Biserica Neagră), which, along with the other political processes that followed, such as "The German Writers Trial", the "Prejba Trial" or "Saint Ana Lake Trial" aimed at unconditionally subjugating the population to political power." (Liliana Jighira, *BRAŞOV. 60 years since "The Black Church Trial"*)

¹⁸ "The break from the late 1950s is described by Ek. Schlandt as the saddest period in choir history, which practically did not exist from November 1959 until March 1960" (Christine Chiriac, *Ein offenes Haus für Leute, die gerne singen Kronstädter Bachchor feiert runden Geburtstag*)

¹⁹ Eckart Schlandt remembers: "After the trials of the German writers and the process of the Black Church (1958) the activity of the Bach Choir went difficult, the orchestra was not allowed to sing in the church. It has been said that in the Black Church is no need any more for an orchestra ... Even the instrumentalists who had collaborated before in the church were afraid to come under these conditions. This was the situation after 1958 until about 1965. Seven hard years for the Black Church community who had been used to good music. Still, the concerts continued, but with amateur or retired instrumentalists in orchestra..." (Radu, *op.cit*)

soprano Emilia Petrescu and mezzo-soprano Martha Kessler (the two eminent artists who came constantly to collaborate in concerts at the Black Church) was that they encouraged us to rebuild the choir and helped us overcome this deadlock. "We are not afraid to come to church, then why the chorists to be afraid?" they said. I collaborated as conductor almost 20 years with Emilia Petrescu between 1964-1984 in different cantatas and oratorios of Bach, Buxtehude, Händel, Haydn, Mozart, Brahms, Bruckner. Emilia Petrescu was appreciated by all" recalls Eckart Schlandt in a recent interview.²⁰ There is a rigorous archive of the Black Church's concerts kept by Eckart Schlandt which save details about the repertoires and the name of the artists. The limited space of this article does not allow the detailed insertion of the concerts, but we know that Emilia Petrescu excelled in Matthäus-Passion and Johannes-Passion by J.S.Bach and also in the Requiem by Mozart and with these titles she returned often in Brasov. Whether it was rehearsals or concerts, the collaboration between Emilia Petrescu, choir and conductor was a warm²¹ and efficient one. "During the rehearsals Emilia Petrescu was very operative, she said things clearly by name, accepted other opinions, had arguments, and she often involved also in the dosage of the organ. It was a productive working atmosphere." (Ek.Schlandt)

The fact that two artists of high caliber have managed to collaborate, animate and constantly produce musical events of such quality, in the register of sacred music, during the communist period, remains a miracle that benefited the Saxon community but also a large public. It was possible due to the courage and perseverance of the artists and perhaps also because the heart of the Kronstadt city of Transylvania, the Black Church, attracted many foreign tourists every year²². This article is dedicated to soprano Emilia Petrescu and organist Eckart Schlandt, who have made a historic contribution in promoting sacred music in Romania, in totally unfavorable times. Their cultural heritage is not limited to the high quality recordings, made by each artist individually in various projects, nor to the impressive number of their concerts, their pedagogical activity or awards obtained

²⁰ Radu, *op.cit.*

²¹ Bianca Manoleanu: „Mrs. Emilia was loved everywhere, but especially in the Saxon lands. The Bach Choirs from Sibiu or Brasov had very serious rehearsals. The soloists came with three, four days before and they worked the quartets, the ensembles. These choruses were like a larger family. Mrs. Emilia was always expected with flowers.” (Constantinescu, pag.230)

²² Eckart Schlandt: „Brasov has always been a tourist city. For the sake of foreigners, however, the communist government allowed some concerts to take place.” (Radu, *op.cit.*)

in recognition. It's far more than that. This legacy has been manifested strongly through the artistic and human values cultivated by the two artists, shared with a community and continued with great courage for decades. In a recent interview, Eckart Schlandt concluded with an old saying: "Pay attention to what you inherited from your parents and predecessors: take care of the inheritance to really become the owner (to own it)".

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