

Alexandru Zirra and the opera *Alexandru Lăpuşneanu*

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Abstract: *This material has the purpose to bring to the forefront one of the great names of the Romanian composers from the middle of the last century, Alexandru Zirra, with the attempt to rememorize his most valuable work, the opera Alexandru Lăpuşneanu. The option for this subject could not lead to an analysis text - most commonly used in scientific communications - but to a presentation of the essential moments of the composer's life and activity, to a highlight on the features of the main character and the essence of the four acts that make up the structure of the work and to underlining the musical-dramatic characteristics of the opera Alexandru Lăpuşneanu as a whole. Given the limited dimensions of this material and taking into account the dimensions of the whole opera, the many remarkable situations of the action (and it should not be forgotten that only the monologue in the final act of the main hero extends over a space whose interpretation lasts ten minutes!), the content of this material sins through the absence of numerous musical examples that could support the theoretical statements; but under the circumstances we consider the lack of appropriate examples to be justified.*

Keywords: *Romanian composition, architectural structure, compositional characteristics*

1. Alexandru Zirra (1883 – 1946). Life and work

Alexandru Zirra is one of the composers who contributed greatly to the development of Romanian music - especially opera music - during the period between the two world wars. These are the years when the Romanian Opera from Bucharest (1921) and the National Opera from Cluj (1920) are being established, on the posters of which are written Romanian titles such as *The Magic Bird* by Ion Borgovan, *At a Village Sitting, Great Evening and Harvest* by Tiberiu Brediceanu, *Tragic Wedding* by Alexis Catargi, *A Stormy Night* by Paul Constantinescu, *The Misfortune and Constantin Brâncoveanu* by Sabin Drăgoi, *St. George's Night* by Tudor Flondor, *Aleodor* by Victor Gheorghiu, *On the High Road and You Do not Play with Love* by Constantin Nottara. In Iasi there were not yet performances of Romanian opera. The musical-dramatic manifestations continued in the traditional

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line drawn by Alexandru Flechtenmacher and Eduard Caudella, the composers who wrote stage music for plays by Gheorghe Asachi, Constantin Negruzzi, Matei Millo, Vasile Alecsandri and others.

During the same period, a very important fact is happening to Romanian music: folklore collections are highly appreciated. The Romanian composers are using more and more the popular song in their score, either in direct form, by taking over, or by inspiring from the songs and rhythm of folk music.

1.1. Biographical elements

Alexandru Zirra was born on July 14, 1883, at Roman, in a modest family - his father was a clerk and his mother was a teacher. As a young child, music delights him and he tries to play on the strings of a violin the folk songs he heard. But because "musician" was not a profession, Zirra attends classes at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Iasi. His passion for music does not disappear, but the student also regularly attends the Theoretical and Solfeggio, Harmony, Canto and Auxiliary Piano classes at the Conservatory where he has Gavriil Musicescu, Enrico Mezetti and Sofia Teodoreanu as teachers. In June 1905 he received the certificate of graduation of the Harmony course and takes 1st prize. At the end of the school year, the students of the Conservatory performed an act from the opera *Rigoletto* by Verdi, the title role being entrusted to the young Alexandru Zirra. The musician will oscillate for a long time between the singer's and the composer's career.

After graduating the Conservatory in Iasi, he goes to Milan to improve his musical studies. At GIUSEPPE VERDI Music Conservatory he attends the composition class of Maestro Carlo Gatti. He doesn't miss a performance at the famous Scala. In order to earn his living, he also works as accompanist for a singing professor. All this music-filled life will lead his preferences to the vocal repertoire.

Alexandru Zirra returned to the country in 1907 and became a professor of Harmony at the Conservatory in Iasi. From 1922 to 1924 he will be the director of this prestigious musical education institution.

In 1909, he went to study for two more years in Milan. When he returns to the Conservatory in Iasi, in 1911, among the students of his Harmony course was the young Mihail Jora. Between the two musicians will later be a close friendship.

Good friends will also be Zirra and the young Sabin Drăgoi whom the teacher helps to join the Iasi Conservatory.

All his practice as a teacher, Zirra uses and exploits it in his scores.

As a student, Zirra learned to cherish the Romanian folk song and dance. Together with his colleagues, he walked the monasteries and villages of Moldavia,

carefully taking notes about what they heard. Strongly impressed by the genius of Mihai Eminescu, he writes his first symphonic work (1911-1912), an adaptation for the scene and music, in four parts, of the poem *Luceafărul* (Evening Star). It is a first approach of Romanian literature by the young composer, but not the last one.

1.2. Creation periods

The work of the composer Alexandru Zirra can be grouped in three creative periods: in the first period, Zirra processes folk melodies or composes folk songs for voice and piano and choruses such as *Nine Songs Put on Words with Piano Accompaniment*, *Cornflowers* (voice - piano), *Wild Flowers* (Voice - Piano) and approximately 30 Romanian lied wich are lost now; In the second period of creation, the composer writes mainly symphonic works and chamber music such as *Romanian Overture*, *Symphony no. 1 (Rustic - Lost)*, *Symphony no. 2 in D minor (Rustic)*, *Symphony no. 3 in F minor (Descriptive)*, *Tândală and Păcală* (Symphonic poem), *The Gypsies* (symphonic poem), *On the Moldavian field* (Symphonic poem), *At Ancuta's inn* (4 symphonic scenes), *The Suite of 10 Moldavian songs*, *Moldavian fairytales* (4 symphonic scenes), *Neamt Fortress* (Legend), *Christmas* (Symphonic Poem - lost), *Sonata for violin and piano*, *Sonata for cello and piano*, *4 string quartets* (lost), *Coral*, *Prelude and Piano Fugue*; the third period is the most important for the composer Alexandru Zirra. It includes the works *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*, *Easter Torch*, *The Goat with Three Kids*, *The Storm* and *Ion Voda Horseshoe* together with other symphonic and chamber music scores.

2. The Opera *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*

In Romanian music, opera work is, for the most part, an explicit reflection of some of the most significant moments in the history of the nation. From the *Cozia Girl* (unfinished score) by Alexandru Flechtenmacher and Petru Rares by Eduard Caudella and up to the lyrical scores signed by Gheorghe Dumitrescu, Tudor Jarda, Norbert Petri, Mansi Barberis... the historical themes prove to be an endless source of inspiration and musical-dramatic approach. Among the indisputable successful achievements in this field there is also the opera *Alexandru Lăpușneanu* by Alexandru Zirra, written between 1929 and 1934 and rewritten after 1940 on a libretto inspired by the famous novel with the same name by Costache Negruzzi.

Alexandru Zirra worked for almost 10 years on the score of his first opera, *Alexandru Lăpușneanu*. The staging of the work was extremely difficult because a

work with a native subject was not very well accepted at that time, neither by the organizers of the Romanian musical life nor by the audience.

The opera Alexandru Lăpușneanu waited about five years to see the stage lights. The subject was considered tendentious. The premiere of the opera took place at the opening of the 1941-1942 opera season in Bucharest and was well received by both the critics and the audience. Here are some press releases:

Mihail Jora in *Timpul*: *"... As far as the musical fabric of the work is concerned, we must congratulate Mr. Zirra for the talent and craftsmanship he has scattered for its success. Mr. Zirra has a fair and precise theatrical sense. He knows how to lead the voices and merge them like he did in that warm Quartet of Act I, where each side can easily be followed. The choirs are also distinguished by the sound balance and noble material used. The boyars choir from the first act, the mixed one from the backstage in the second act, the choir of the monks in the third ac, all those are musical pearls, each with their specific feature, according to the action. Apart from the roles of Lăpușneanu and of Lady Ruxandra, who dominates the opera, all the secondary roles: Moțoc, Spancioc, Cornea ... () ... the jester, the four companions of the lady, each one fulfill their musical, honest role, and the two beautiful areas played by Ruxandra are merged by so many Romanian flavour that they have nothing to do with the areas or cavatines encountered in Italian operas. The connection between music and action is eternally preserved."*²

Emanoil Ciomac: *The fourth performance of "Alexandru Lăpușneanu" - ... a work that finally achieves the obvious desideratum of our audience: to be able to understand it, to find at least in part a real Romanian sensitivity, to have cohesion, to keep its dramatic interest alive, to have the sense of theater. All this, Mr Zirra's partition gives them. The actual song, less... The music of Mr. Zirra, although you cannot find any detailed resemblance to another one, is made in the form of a verismo Italian opera which is blooming for the last 50 years. Listening to it, you often evoke Puccini. But as I said it, more like a general appearance and atmosphere than as exact reminiscence. A harmonious opera, where the recitative is also melodious and the cadences and resolutions are not unexpected, which always satisfies the hearing of the audience. Although the audience doesn't get characteristic refrains easily to memorize, we believe it is never upset by great symphonic developments in architectural plans, or in detail, or by aggression or aggressive dissonances. Harmonic modernisms are shrouded, concealed, melted in the subtle instrumentation. And even if some asperities would offend the audience desiring absolute consonants, they are made explicable by the wilderness, the horror of some text situations. It is curious that the general tone, the melodic and rhythmic inspirational background is rather idyllic, elegiac, singing resignedly with*

² Alexandru Zirra by Al. Schmidt, p. 26 - 27

sorrow and affection. It is something similar to the pages in "Boris Godunov" which evokes the figure of the strangled tzar Dimitrie. This is something intimate, gentle, lacking the sharp and grandiloquent factor. In other words, what is more beautiful and more moving is of Romanian Orthodox origin, as are generally the choirs in Scenes 1 and 4 and the mourning of the remorse and visions of Lăpușneanu, which through the native Melos always keep us thinking about the Shakespeare's Moscow Tsar...³

2.1. Lead role

The musical picture of the unforgiving Moldavian ruler has given the composer special problems.

The first element to be taken into account was that of historical fitting, in general, in full convergence with the laws of musical-dramatic construction imposed by the characteristics of the lyrical genre. For this purpose, Alexandru Zirra had to carry out a transfer of literary values from Negruzzi's novel, a transfer that he adapted to specific requirements, eventually succeeding in a natural grading of dramatic tension ascending to a terrible ending.

Enthusiastic, determined and ambitious patriot, Lăpușneanu hates and represses without mercy the robbery and the betrayal of the boyars. The conflict is generated precisely by this attitude of the ruler to the cunning and hypocrisy of the boyars who betrayed him. Lăpușneanu seeks to achieve the unity and freedom of the people, and his hatred against the boyarship is presented in a constant contrast with love and understanding for the many because, says the ruler, "From the people we must bring forth clever, diligent and loving people for their homeland. "

The contribution of the author - composer and librettist at the same time - to the text of this opera (musical mirror of some obvious historical facts) consists in concentrating the essential elements of the drama around the fundamental, irreconcilable conflict between the social categories, between the opposite social classes, between the abnegation, courage, dignity and cowardice, cunning, and upstartism, especially psychologically.

2.2. Structure of the opera

Act I. We are in the hall of the Ruler's Palace. Through an impressive monologue, the ruler expresses clearly from the very beginning his position towards the boyars - on the one hand and towards the people - on the other. Alexandru Lăpușneanu asserts his desire for vengeance and the hatred for the boyars who betrayed him:

³ *Alexandru Zirra* by Al. Schmidt, p. 27 - 28

Lăpușneanu
mf *cresc.*

Am a-ti-fa u - ră, a-ti-ia se - te de răz-bu-
na - re con - tra a - ces-tor bo - ieri lași și in - tri - ganți!

At the same time, he expresses his understanding and compassion for the oppressed and enslaved people by the same boyars. "... Poor people, your patience is great... How many times crying replace the meal ... You know joy only from saying.":

mf

Săr-man po-pec, răb - da - rea ta fi-e-
ma-re; De ci-te ori pînă-sul nu în-a-și-put loc de ma - căi!

The boyars appear. The boyar's Divan tries with blarney to assure the ruler that the country is quiet and the people are obedient. Lăpuşneanu tells them that while they, the boyars, live in comfort, peasants live in poverty. The accused answer the ruler he does not have to *"take care of the fools which... are used to endure and to work since forever."* From the outside, you can hear the crowd's shouts asking for justice and for the head of the boyar Moţoc. Between him and Lăpuşneanu there is a tense scene: filled with the fear of death, Moţoc, the cunning and coward vornic, demands Lăpuşneanu's mercy, assuring him of his devotion and his services. Moţoc says he is a boyar, and those outside are fools, and Lăpuşneanu replies the famous line: *"Fools, but many"*. Nothing convinces the ruler. Disgusted by the lying oaths and by the betrayal of the boyars, he handed Moţoc to the people for judgment, saying, *"One less from the lowest ones."*

Ruxandra, Lăpuşneanu's wife, appears. By acting *"in the name of God"* in the appearance of humility, she still reveals hypocrisy and upstartism as her disposition to stand by the boyars and not by her husband blaming him for Moţoc's death.

Ruxandra also speaks the biblical words *"Whoever removes the sword, by the sword shall die."* She pleads for forgiveness, patience and gentleness and seeks to divert the ruler's attention from the conflict with the greedy boyars. Neither the boyars Spancioc nor Cornea, who try to convince Lăpuşneanu that *"the people cannot be lead without fear"* cannot change the attitude of the ruler. His answer is, *"From the crowd will be tomorrow's boyars ..."*

Act II. The action takes place in the palace garden, in a serene, spring-like atmosphere. Lady Ruxandra and the ladies enjoy the fresh air. But the thoughts of Ruxandra are dark and go back to the bloody events that obsess her. Girls are making efforts to cheer her up. Lăpuşneanu appears and tries to justify facts: *"... evil must be destroyed, cut from the root."* The ruler is troubled, but determined to revenge on the boyars. The ruler is convinced that *"We must be able to count on the people", "from the people we must slowly raise up smart, hardworking, honest, loving people for their land."* Ruxandra does not understand him. She became Lăpuşneanu's wife after he had murdered her first husband, Jodlea. Along with the ruler, Ruxandra knew nothing but fear. Lăpuşneanu calls her words *"female madness"* and continues to express his thoughts full of bitterness and sadness.

Act III. In the hall of the palace, Lăpuşneanu speaks to the boyars with harsh words, accusing them of infamous conspiracy that led the country to split. He points out that, due to the betrayal of the boyars, he had to sign the agreement with the Turks, which submitted the country to terrible tributes. *"You have forgotten your faith; you have passed over the throne, over me... I have not called you to the feast but to the righteous judgment,"* says the ruler of the boyars. There

follows the terrible scene of the murder of 47 boyars. It is the dreadful revenge against the cowards and the traitors of the country.

Terrified by the whines and the screams that have reached to her, Ruxandra comes running to see what's going on. To her insistent questions, Lăpușneanu replies, *"Nothing has happened; an old reckoning that is today over."* Then, with obvious irony, he adds that, by what he did, he only sought to defend her silence and to secure her sleep.

Act IV. Dressed up as a monk, exhausted and sick, Lăpușneanu lies in a small chair. He is tormented by doubts that what he has done was not good, whether he did or did not have the right to shed blood to achieve his intended purpose. His soul is full of remorse. However, he raises these feelings, determined and stating again that *"... evil must be cut down to the bottom."* Even though two of the boyars escaped running, the ruler is not afraid of them.

The seeming and short silence rebuilt due to the monk's clothes is soon driven away, scattered by the crowd of boyars demanding Bogdan, Lăpușneanu's son, as the ruler of Moldavia. His endless hatred against the boyars who want to take advantage of his weakness and illness, once again takes over the ruler's soul, who knows that if it is changed, the country will be overwhelmed by troubles. In his blind anger he thinks of sacrificing his son rather than renouncing the throne. He is so agitated that he passes out. Lady Ruxandra wants to help him, but at the suggestions of the Spancioc and Cornea boyars, she agrees to poison her husband. When Lăpușneanu asks for water, Ruxandra gives him the cup of poison that ends the life of the unfortunate ruler.

2.3. Musical-dramatic features

The score closely follows the action, with all the contrasts and its meanders, drawing the sound of different human types and limit situations involved in its development, culminating with Lăpușneanu's pathetic monologue at the end of the work. The musical-dramatic structure is based on the intonations of the Romanian folk song integrated with a traditional architectonics. Overall, the opera offers great musical moments in which the sincerity of the expression, the generosity of the melodic inspiration, the variety of harmonic, polyphonic and orchestral language is imposed as characteristic of the composer's style.

Alexandru Zirra turns out to be a subtle human nature expert giving his characters a second life through his music. Of course, the most imposing character is the ruler Alexandru Lăpușneanu, whose soul worries are traced and played back in the context of each musical phrase of the role, of every word. Alexandru Lăpușneanu is undoubtedly not only a legendary hero; he is a symbol of the

struggle for righteousness and truth. His drama has a precise social and historical determination, his end, no matter how it happened, becomes inevitable due to the historical context in which the real forces capable of fulfilling his ideal were still insufficient under all the major aspects of organization and consciousness. We repeat, for the composer Alexandru Zirra, the ruler Alexandru Lăpușneanu remains the symbol of intransigence, boldness, abnegation, dignity and love for the people.

No less convincing is the role of Ruxandra, the “two-faced” woman - Lăpușneanu's wife and, ultimately, his enemy.

Throughout the course of the opera, the composer uses elements of musical structure and known forms - areas, dramatic recitatives, different vocal assemblies, choirs. Zirra was influenced by Italian and Russian opera. However, we believe there is a breath, a very specific expressive color good enough to set up an original style, the style of Alexander Zirra. To his portrayal talent, Zirra adds a remarkable mastery of harmonist and orchestrator, creator of choral and vocal-symphonic music. Here are qualities that justify an enthusiastic reception of the opera “Alexandru Lăpușneanu” on the occasion of the 1941 premiere in Bucharest, when the singers Lucia Bercescu and Petre Ștefănescu Goangă were distributed in the main roles. On this occasion, Mihai Jora remarks in a chronicle that “Alexandru Lăpușneanu” *appears not only as a good work but, more importantly, as a dramatic Romanian work of great importance, in which the folk element is not a goal but a means of musical expression in the theater just as Sabin Drăgoi had so far succeeded in “The Misfortune”*.

The dramatic monologue of Alexandru Lăpușneanu is positioned in the fourth act of the opera. The orchestral introduction sets the heavy atmosphere with the tragic accents of the moment. The first words are “*I feel the end is coming ...*” Overwhelmed by what he had done, the ruler was in dialogue with the divinity, asking for mercy and explaining his gesture. But the visions overwhelm him, he has terrible nightmares. The monologue runs in repeated crescendos, in increasing waves. “*I'm afraid, I'm afraid of the coming judgment ...*” Voices are getting harder to cover the dense orchestra. The monologue takes 10 long and hard minutes. It is in fact a story of what has happened - the slaughter of the boyars - in which are inserted words to God “*Woe, woe, Lord, take my torments away, give me comfort...*” Music has inflections of wailing and lullaby at the same time. The words are hard to say and harder to play. “*They have received their retribution, I have calmed my hatred. I tried to come close to God ...*”

The confession, the music composition, the mourning, the begging, the prayer, the repentance, flow together, and mutually reinforce one another in a moment compared, in the context of the National Schools creation, by the monologue of Boris Godunov in the opera with the same title of Mussorgsky.

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