

## Myth in the Romanian Opera Creation

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“Myth keeps for eternity, the bough  
of the generations’ soul” (Mihail Sadoveanu)

**Abstract:** *Both myths, Miorița [The Little Ewe] and Meșterul Manole [The Master Builder Manole] are based on an enhancement of death. The presence of death at the core of Romanian popular spirituality does not mean a pessimistic vision of the world, but a direct contact with peasant life. Orpheus is the hero having sacrificed his life in order to unveil the charm of art to the humans. Prometheus has always been depicted as a great friend of human beings. Don Juan has never been taken seriously. Departing from this tradition and considering him with some gravity, we can find him throughout the centuries and having become a myth. The Romanian reply to Don Juan’s myth is given by Cornel Țăranu, in the opera “Don Giovanni’s Secret”. In conclusion, myth is the one that determines the human being to create and offers him/her ever-newer inventiveness perspectives.*

Key-words: opera, myth, ballad, sacrifice, music

### 1. Introduction

George Călinescu synthesizes “the pillars of autochthonous tradition” in four myths. All four of them can be found in an either direct or diffuse form, in Gheorghe Dumitrescu’s creation. Traian and Dochia, the symbol of the Romanian people’s formation, is subtly generated by the shepherd’s apparition, in the opera Decebal (third act). Miorița [The Little Ewe], the symbol of pastoral life, is constituted in the ballet-oratorio with the same name. Meșterul Manole [The Master Builder Manole], the aesthetic myth, the symbol of the creation by sacrifice, is the theme of the homonymous opera, also finding its echoes in Orpheus. Zburătorul [The Flyer], the heroic myth, pulsates in the musical fibre of many of his opera characters and, at the same time, is the literary-philosophical argument of the oratorio-ballet, “Luceafarul” [The Evening Star] (Călinescu).

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## 2. Perennial myths and Romanian musical replies

Both myths, Miorița and Meșterul Manole, are based on an enhancement of death. “The idea of reintegration in Cosmos by death is apparent in Miorița. The motive of Miorița has been known since 1852, when its first version, collected by Vasile Alecsandri, was edited. It is considered more than a folkloric phenomenon, more precisely the expression of our people’s existential attitude, which was enhanced by the participation of Alexandru Odobescu, Duiliu Zamfirescu, Nicolae Iorga, Barbu Stefanescu-Delavrancea, Mihail Sadoveanu, Lucian Blaga, and others.” (Eliade, 1980)

The presence of death at the core of Romanian popular spirituality does not mean a pessimistic vision of the world. A direct contact with peasant life decidedly disproves these suppositions; in general, the Romanians do not experience either fear of life, or religious pessimism, or attraction to asceticism. Nevertheless, the two essential creations of Romanian popular spirituality bear, at their core, an enhancement of death.

Caracostea (1941) attempts to find the deep meaning of the ballad Miorița: “not the mystics of death, but the exultation and glorification of life, in its creative forms, the exultation and glorification in the act of death itself, is the essence.”

Alecsandri’s variant ranges among those which concentrate the sum of episodes and genres whereby the myth finds its expression, sprung from ancient practices of the pastoral world, whose rediscovery opened to Brăiloiu the comprehension of the original meaning of the “Mioritic nuptials”. Closely related to the “Song of the Fir-tree”, threnody and nuptial song, it is the expression of the symbolic marriage between the dead unmarried young man and a fir-tree, the vital symbol. The ceremony highlights the individual’s fulfilment, by the life of the couple. Practiced by many peoples, the posthumous wedding unveils the real meaning of the “Mioritic nuptials”. Polemizing with Blaga, Brăiloiu formulates the conclusion: “Miorița expresses neither the voluptuousness of the renunciation, nor the inebriation of the void, of the nothingness, but their very opposite, as the remembrance of the original and life-protecting gestures is perpetuated therein” (Foghi, 1964).

In the extended variants of the popular ballad, “Miorița” appears to us as a complex poetic-musical structure, with over 930 known variants. Approaching this theme, the composer Gheorghe Dumitrescu offers the myth a modern expression of performance-concert. “Miorița” was composed by Gheorghe Dumitrescu between 1946 and 1977; thinking the music in the ballet performance enabled the intersection between epic and lyrical, the chorographical representation suggested by music. At the first public audition of “Miorița”, the composer confessed his thoughts:

“The shepherd’s attitude expresses the confidence in the human’s unlimited capacity to overcome his/her suffering, defeat, materializing his/her existence in moral values and facts meant to endure even after his/her disappearance” (Gheciu, 1984).

If the epical nucleus of “Miorița” proceeds from some indefinite Romanian Middle Ages, the theme of Meșterul Manole [The Master Builder Manole] is much older. It is Romanian, yet it dates back to the remote mists of primitive humankind. The ancient myth of the necessity of human sacrifice for a construction to last, is also encountered at some European peoples. According to Mircea Eliade’s formulation, “Meșterul Manole is a primordial mythical scenario.” George Călinescu posits: “Meșterul Manole symbolizes the conditions of human creation, the incorporation of individual suffering in the artwork.”

The theme of the popular ballad “Meșterul Manole” sprung from an ancient superstition according to which, in order to endure, any construction must have a being in its foundations. The superstition has lingered even nowadays in South-Eastern Europe, in the form of a custom in which the foundations of a construction are sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificed animal. This ancient tradition entails nevertheless deeper meanings: the first would be that, without sacrifice, no highly valuable artwork can be achieved; the second would be that of the master builder Manole’s artistic ideal, which is never relinquished, regardless of the required sacrifice. The tragicality of the supreme sacrifice culminates with his building up his own wife in the brickwork, when the main characters’ moral traits are emphasized: Ana’s soul gentleness, Manole’s strength of character, self-mastery. In the monograph consecrated to this theme, namely “the sacrifice for creation”, Ion Taloș determines twelve variants of motives: the motive of the deserted wall, the one of the crumbling walls, the motive of the dream, the one of the woman destined to be built – enclosed within the wall – the one of the gradual building, and so forth ...

The ballad ends with the death of the master builder and his fellow builders, which signifies total sacrifice. Lucian Blaga leaves the workers alive, as concrete proofs of the truth that the human being’s great achievements require great human sacrifices.

George Dumitrescu composed the dramatic legend “Meșterul Manole” in four acts and seven scenes, on a libretto written by the composer after the popular ballad with the same name. Meșterul Manole is a eulogy dedicated to creative ingenuity and to the cultivation of beauty, the tragedy of eros and sacrifice. Gheorghe Dumitriu composed an opera in which the spirit of ballads lives and thrills from the first audition, as the composer chose the solution which does not distort the folkloric vein. Manole’s monologue is rich in spontaneous cantabile character, and represents a valuable moment of the opera, attractive by the simplicity of the musical discourse, based on a modalism generated by the ancient popular scales. The master builder foresees, with Mioritic clarity, his approaching end, the sacrifice seems natural to him, as a sanction for the unfulfilled work; his own existence seeming meaningless in front of his failed mission.

A masterful transfiguration of the popular chant detaches from Ana’s aria, which develops an enchanting lyricism. The composer entrusts to the flute a

counter-melody. By the simplicity of his music, Gheorghe Dumitrescu descends from legend and symbol into the reality of a tragic event.

Orpheus is the hero having sacrificed his life in order to unveil the charm of art to the humans, the hero capable of humanizing nature so that he might be returned his wife, Eurydice, abducted by the underworld gods. Truth or legend, “the story is imbued with eternal truths, poetic beauty and deep wisdom” (Acsan).

The mystery of the genius confronted with the limits of the human condition, which he attempted to transcend, explains Orpheus’ perenniality and universality. Mircea Eliade posits: “Orpheus is a great civilizing hero, who cultivates music, magic, medicine, and who excels in taming beasts” (Acsan). The myth of Orpheus is related to two gods, encountered both at the Greeks, and at the Thracians, step brothers with opposed natures, tempers and divine attributes: “on the one hand, the solar, harmonious, musical, healing Apollo, on the other hand, the nocturnal, madding, tormented, mysterious and noisy Dionysus” (Acsan, 1981).

Orpheus’ destiny is bound to the sea, both in his lifetime, and after his tragic end. The ancient Greeks felt that, on the deck of Argo ship, music and poetry could not be missing, by their most renowned representative. The mythical motive of the tragic Orpheus and of the “Thracian girl Eurydice” has been the most frequently approached by the European composers, along the centuries. From “Orfeo” by Geremi and Poliziano, in 1476, through the lyrical tragedy by Gheorghe Dumitrescu, up to now, there are over sixty works, in the European and universal music history, focused on this mythological motive.

Orpheus – the supreme myth of art, intertwined with symbolic broken love, has been, over time, a superb theme for the musical theatre.

Gheorghe Dumitrescu proposes, by his ample tragedy “Orfeu – Prințul trac” [Orpheus – The Thracian Prince] in four acts and eight scenes, an utterly original angle of approach to the ancient motive: Orpheus, restoring an imaginary world, in a geographically real space.

The significance of the subject is no other than the reinterpretation of tragic love in the light of the comforting idea of the ancient Romanian ritual, upon which the composer confers a significant value of permanence of the existential vision. “Orfeu – Prințul trac” [Orpheus – The Thracian Prince] is an opera of the ensembles, as the tonal-modal concept finds its plenary expression in the great choral scenes.

The composer finds greatness in simplicity.

Prometheus has always been depicted as a great friend of human beings. In order to help the weak, he stole the fire or, according to other sources, he entered the gods’ pantry, bringing along the vital power to inspire his statues of clay. Because of his daring deeds, Prometheus had been enchained for millennia to the rocks of Caucasus where, periodically, a vulture sent by Zeus devoured his entrails. Prometheus is a civilizing hero as, by his highly perilous fight, he succeeded in raising the human being on another historical level.

This mythical hero appears to us enlightened by a special aura, as he is the one who brings humankind its most special gift, fire, and, therefore, he is conferred upon the virtue of pioneer of civilization. The theme became a source of inspiration for poets, by the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when Hesiod of Boeotia described Prometheus who, doomed by Zeus, could not possibly lead mankind to the better, as he had infringed Zeus' will. Only after three centuries did the Athenian tragedian Aeschylus restore the promethean ideological moment; the opportunity occurred when internal and foreign tyranny was abolished, and a temperate and favourable wind was aroused. From the satirical drama "Prometheus, the Fire Bringer", whereof only a few savoury images remained, depicting the adventures of the stolen fire, hidden in a stem of the temple porch, and which, by smouldering, became portable. After a decade, "Prometheia" trilogy appeared, whereof "Prometheus bound" came to us whole, and the other two, fragmented.

Through the creation "Prometheus", by Doru Popovici, the contemporary comprehension made a decisive step forward. Opera-oratorio, "Prometheus" allows rigorous emphasizing, precise construction, in terms of form, as well as representative structural outlining. Doru Popovici's creation is the hymn dedicated to the fight for the better, the hero signifying the eternal symbol of the willingness and endeavour to progress.

The theme of the seducer Don Juan blossomed in the fiction of the Iberian Peninsula, where a certain erotic propensity has existed long before. The way in which the playwright Tirso de Molina built the conqueror's figure, rendered the theme evergreen. Don Juan is, first of all, the image of the libertinage at the court of Philip the fourth, and of the feudal nobility's decay. "In Don Juan, the joy of earthly life, the cult of pleasure, the self-trust, the liberation from moral constraints, assert themselves" (Rousset). Don Juan is a mixture of shadows and lights, cynical yet seducer, liar yet brave, egoist yet ready to pay for his errors. His continuous rush for voluptuousness proves the lack of satisfaction, the search. "Don Juan's tragedy comes from his searching the voluptuousness of the senses in a lower plane and within a short range, within himself" (Rousset, 1999).

Considered the embodiment of flippancy, Don Juan has never been taken seriously. Departing from this tradition and considering him with some gravity, we can find him throughout the centuries and having become a myth. A creation turned into a myth lasts longer than other artistic artworks, tending towards the world of essences and representing what Plato called "eternal ideas". Based on a libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart gave dramatic-musical amplitude to Don Juan's theme, creating thereby one of his masterpieces, as well as of the entire opera history. Mozart's "Don Giovanni" has stayed in history as a transitional hero between eras, possessing romantic advances wherein elements of the evil can be distinguished, with its destructive attributes, but also with constructive anticipations.

Mozart's hero can be deemed a recreation of the myth, who managed to operate particularly deep mutations of meaning. The Romanian reply to Don Juan's myth is given by Cornel Țăranu, in the opera "Don Giovanni's Secret". The creation is a farce of good taste, a spring of optimism and good cheer.

Cornel Țăranu's creation stays under the sign of continuous innovation and is a pioneering work for the Romanian chamber opera. The poster of its premiere announced that the opera addressed, to an equal extent, both "the opera lovers, and the opera haters".

The action occurs somewhere in Europe, between Barcelona, Venice and Rome, in an inn, by the mid of a very relative 18<sup>th</sup> century. The sonorous path of the opera covers three great areas, well delimited, according to the dramatic moment it supports:

- a free-structure serialism,
- mediaeval moments,
- typical jazz sonorities in the action episodes.

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, we dare say myth is the one that determines the human being to create and offers him/her ever-newer inventiveness perspectives. It ensures the human that "what (s)he prepares to do has already been done before; it helps him/her cast his/her doubts." (Eliade, 1978)

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