

Nicolae Ştefu – pedagogue and musician

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Abstract: *Nicolae Ştefu* was an important promoter of cultural and musical values in Transylvania at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. He was born in Cladova, near Arad, in 1855, completing his scientific and musical education here. Nicolae Ştefu distinguished himself through an impressive cultural openness and held an important place in the field of music, composition, choral and pedagogical conducting. His passion for teaching and promoting cultural, historical and musical values also to be noted and he is considered a leading patriot of his time. He set the basis for a secular and religious musical education, being directly involved in organizing and promoting youth choirs as well as conducting them. His compositions are - mostly – dedicated to choral ensembles and religious music. The year 2014 meant rediscovering Nicolae Ştefu' personality, during the 100 years commemoration since his passing into eternity.

Key-words: *composition, commemoration, cultural and musical values*

1. Historical presentation

Nicolae Ştefu was a conductor and a composer from Banat, known for his music teaching activity and his liturgical composition. In 2014, the year of his commemoration, his personality was rediscovered. Horia Cristian - musician, pianist and professor - was identified as being one of his descendants in Braşov. Nicolae Ştefu's involvement in the social and educational live of Arad is revealed in the documents of the time and in his compositions, dedicated mainly to the choir ensembles. As written in musicologist Viorel Cosma's work - ***Musicians from Romania, Lexicon***, Volume IX, 2006, Nicolae Ştefu was born in 1855 in the village of Cladova, Arad county (he died in 1914 in Arad). He began his studies in Arad – at the Preparandia in town, where Iosif Goldiş taught him the chant, while Petru Popovici taught him vocal and instrumental music. He later continued his studies at the Conservatory of Music from Arad (theory and solfeggio, as well as violin and piano). Founder and initiator of several groups and choirs, Nicolae Ştefu was a catalyst for education and cultural life in Banat in the nineteenth century.

Here is a very documented discourse, proving the importance of Nicolae Ştefu's personality, made by Professor Radu Homescu, PhD.

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A hundred years after his death (2014), Nicolae Ștefu catches our attention anew, as a representative of the culture and the school of Arad. Author of textbooks, fighting to promote education in Romanian and leader of the *Teachers' Association*, journalist, organizer, conductor of choirs, as well as composer, Nicolae Ștefu is a remarkable person, permanently placed on the list of those who contributed to Transylvania's precious cultural and educational treasure, activating during the era of material and spiritual preparation for the completion of the Romanian state unity, facing the vicissitudes of the time through sacrifices and perseverance, armed with a steadfast love for the nation.

He began his musical studies at the Preparandia in Arad, where he graduated as a brilliant student in 1876. There, at the high pedagogical school, he learned the *Chant and the Typica* from Iosif Goldiș, and the *Vocal and Instrumental music* from Petru Popovici. He then continued his studies at the Music Conservatory of Arad, between 1873 and 1875, Ioan Händl, professor of theory and solfeggio and Iosif Crispin, professor of violin and piano – the headmaster and owner of the renowned conservatory – being his mentors.

Stepping through the gates of the Preparandia with a thorough training in teaching and music (including that of the Conservatory of Arad), doubled by an outstanding vocal talent, Nicolae Ștefu enjoyed acclaim even during his pedagogical studies, being entrusted the violin and choral music training of student Ion Vidu from the *Application School* of the Preparandia, a disciple with whom he collaborated his entire life. I had the opportunity to hear the confessions of Mrs. Lia Benkötzi – Vidu, from Lugoj, the daughter of the famous folklorist, composer and conductor of choirs, born in the Arad region, confirming her father's appreciation for Nicolae Ștefu.

During his studies, N. Ștefu distinguished himself through his virtuosity in the art of conducting, becoming between 1874 and 1876 the leader of the Students' Choir of the Preparandia and of the Reading Society within the same institution (1875-1876), who promoted Romanian ecclesiastical and secular music in the town on the river Mureș. The choir events of the two groups, without exception, were noted and commented on the Pest, Brașov, Caransebeș, Sibiu and Oradea press, particularly in the Iosif Vulcan's *Familia* magazine and also in the *Lumina* magazine in Arad, edited by the institutional doublet Preparandia – the Theological Institute where Ioan Slavici, then a student at Budapest, was part of the editorial group.

After graduating from the Preparandia in 1876, Nicolae Ștefu became the first teacher to the first Orthodox religious school in Șiria, where, during the early days of his activity, he founded *The Ploughmen Choir*, which is the oldest choir in the Arad area. Moreover, to our knowledge, the choir in Șiria is among the first set in Transylvania and Banat, the first being the choir from Chizătău, founded in 1857, which prompted Ștefu to follow the example. In *Our ploughmen choirs* article, published in the *People's Tribune* on the 5/17 January 1897, as well as in the *Musical Romania* of Bucharest, published in the same year and with the same title,

as he himself confesses, the passion for founding choirs came from the impressions produced by his visit to Chizătau in the school year 1875/1876, at the invitation of his friend, the theology student Lucian Sepeșan, where he witnessed performances "of the few hundreds of peasants-choristers", members of the choir founded by Father Trif Sepeșan, his friend's father. In the article, Ștefu made a compelling plea for the need to promote rural music with culturalization purposes, showing the strong effect of such an action "in stopping the youth from disrespectful practices". Moreover, he suggested that the village sittings have choral music themes and have them hosted in schools, in an organized way. His musicological activity, aiming at the cultural aspects, especially choirs, is an important documentary source for investigating the Romanian music past and it was continued on a large scale on the pages of the *People's Tribune*, by publishing articles on the artistic life of the choirs in Arad or Banat, or the musical life in general. It places Nicolae Ștefu among the first musicologists - pedagogues in Transylvania and Banat.

The choir from Șiria made its first appearance with an exceptional repertoire. His devoted friend, Ciprian Porumbescu, the bard from Bucovina, dedicated his newly created composition, entitled *The March of the Ploughmen Choir from Șiria*, to the group (sending its original manuscript, in pencil, found today in the Library of the "Gh. Dima" Conservatory in Cluj-Napoca, the N. Firu collection). Among other choir pieces, Porumbescu sent Ștefu "*Three colors*".

There is a laudatory article about the choir in Șiria, written by the journalist Ioan Russu-Șirianu, published in Bucharest on the 6th of October 1890 in *The Romanian* newspaper (founded by C. A. Rosetti), entitled *Ciprian Porumbescu and Nicu Ștefu*, an article which was replicated in full in Arad on the 2nd of December 1914, in *The Romanian* newspaper (founded by Vasile Goldiș), on Nicolae Ștefu's death. The article brings to light an eloquent testimony on the personalities of the two great friends, the very important role Porumbescu's creation played in Transylvania and Banat, as well as Nicolae Ștefu's role in promoting the musical creation of the composer from Bucovina. Designed with the idea of a parallel, highlighting the similarities between Porumbescu and Ștefu, the author showed in his article the spiritual connection and the profound friendship and cooperation, as well as the significant role that Ștefu played in promoting Porumbescu's music "*The bard from Bucovina spent his summers composing –I. Russu-Șirianu wrote–while Nicu Ștefu was explaining to his colleagues what Porumbescu and the others had composed*". The article states about their friendship, that "*Porumbescu probably had many friends and admirers, but none more sincere than Ștefu. The letters he has from Porumbescu are a treasure to him - some of them he sent to Porumbescu's father... The (musical n.n.) notes, original compositions written especially for the choirs conducted by Ștefu, are a sacred heritage for Ștefu. Nothing proves better the admiration and the love that Ștefu had for Porumbescu than the fact that he made his compositions known, being performed everywhere the range of his activity*

extended. I happened to hear- continued I. Russu-Şirianu - *the peasants working in the hillside singing "Three colors".*

2. Pedagogical Activity

Regarding the way they met, it should be noted that in 1875, when the *Arboroasa* was founded in Cernăuți, the *Reading Society of the Students in Arad* contacted its counterpart in Bucovina through its president, Ciprian Porumbescu. At the onset of the famous *Arboroasa* trial, when Ciprian Porumbescu was arrested and imprisoned, Nicolae Ştefu is the one who writes the most encouraging letters. After release from prison, Porumbescu and Ştefu begin a lasting collaboration on musical creation, maintaining an intense correspondence. Nicolae Ştefu offered consistent support in printing the music sheets, Porumbescu's musical creations, as the teacher had an influence over the *Victoria* Bank, as well as being acquainted with important music publishers in Leipzig and Vienna. Moreover, the written accounts of Aurel Ştefu, the son of the teacher from Arad, show how Nicolae Ştefu used to correct the religious works of the composer from Bucovina, he himself being a connoisseur of church music. Aurel Ştefu donated the composition "*The Sacred Liturgy Chants - in C major*", Porumbescu's creation, to the *St. Nicolae* church in Cluj-Napoca. Porumbescu's words of thanks for the melody adjustments made by Ştefu can be found on its cover, under his signature.

From the time spent in Şiria, a cultural event organized by N. Ştefu must be highlighted and registered in capital letters in the Romanian music history. It refers to the summer of 1878, after the Romanian state declaration of independence. It is a well-known fact that Alecsandri won the *Latinity Award* at Montpellier, France in May 1878, with the poem, *The Song of the Latin Nation*. In June, the famous Filippo Marchetti, composer of the opera *Ruy Blas*, first presented at the Scala from Milano, composed the music for Alecsandri's poem. In July of the same year, in Braşov, Gheorghe Dima's choir sang *The Song of the Latin Nation*. Through correspondence with the latter, kept by Iuliu Traian Mera, Nicolae Ştefu received the music sheet for Marchetti's composition and the Choir of the ploughmen sang it in Şiria, in August 1878. In this manner, the important historical act of Romania's Independence was masterfully marked in Şiria, where the Choir of the ploughmen interpreted *The Song of the Latin Nation*, conducted by Nicolae Ştefu, an event which was widely publicized in the press. In 1883, after seven years of prodigious activity in Şiria, Ştefu became a teacher in Cuvin, a beautiful town, also situated at the foot of the Zărand, in the Arad vineyard. Here, he founded another choir, during the first days at the beginning of the school year, introducing well-known choir songs from Porumbescu's creation, but also from other composers, in its repertoire. He was the founder and conductor of the choir until 1890, when his destiny path changed again.

The organizational rules of the Cuvin choir are an important methodological guide for the organization and functioning of village choirs, especially for teachers lacking instructions on how to form school, adults or church choirs. In the musical pedagogy of the time, these rules were listed and recommended and there were stories about them in the press. There, in Cuvin, from 1883, Nicolae Ștefu started summer courses on choir conducting, which were attended by the teachers in the diocese of Arad until 1890. All these initiatives and achievements received unanimous recognition, Ștefu becoming a landmark in the art of choir conducting in Transylvania and Banat, the correspondence he kept in this area, where he was requested advice, repertoires and invitations for participation, is a proof of his mastery in the field of choir music. His numerous conferences and courses for teachers and peasants conductors, in Șiria, Cuvin, Covăsânț, Semlac, Vărădia and Șeitin should also be mentioned. He wrote studies, articles, essays and musical chronicles that highlighted the importance of the choir music and the effective participation as choir members.

In 1890, Nicolae Ștefu wins the position of teacher at the Romanian school of Pârneava, being accompanied, in other districts of Arad, by a constellation of brave teachers, all of them mentioned, to this day, in the historical registers of the Romanian education in Transylvania, as being virtuous teachers, authors of excellent textbooks and important cultural animators. Among them, Nicolae Ștefu distinguished himself, especially as choir and theater performances organizer, journalist, poet and famous humorist. At the Pârneava school, N. Ștefu proceeded to organize the students' choir, he held successful choir performances, as well as folklore dances and poetry reciting, where even the Romanian leaders from Arad, such as Ștefan Cicio-Pop, Vasile Goldis, Ioan Suci, used to participate, together with Nicolae Oncu -the manager of the Victoria Bank and Sava Raicu. After the *National House* was founded in 1902 near the school where Ștefu was a teacher, personalities of the time were present at the cultural activities where his students participated, thus drawing the entire Romanian population, made up of peasants, artisans and intellectuals. Through the positions held within the *Arad Association for culture and preservation of the Romanian people*, as a simple member, member of the board (1894) and committee member (1896), as well as publicist at the *People's Tribune*, *The Tribune*, *The Romanian*, *The Romanian People* (Budapest) etc., where he fulfills the role of cultural animator through the press, Nicolae Ștefu led the choirs from the area of Arad and beyond, promoting Romanian music creation and introducing works by Gavril Musicescu, Ciprian Porumbescu, Dumitru G. Kiriac, Wilhelm Humpel, Gheorghe Dima, Ion Vidu, Tiberiu Bredicean and others, including his own compositions, into the choir repertoire. From 1890, he was the founder and the conductor of the *Progress*, the Romanian Craftsmen Society. Driven by his vocation and his passion for enlightening ordinary people, Ștefu

played an essential role in the affiliation to the Arad Association of the *Progress Society*, whose influential leader he became in 1894, when he founded *The Romanian Craftsmen Branch Choir* within this prestigious Association. He also founded the *Romanian Peasants Choir* and the *Intellectual Choir in Pârneava*, performing on the stage of the National House, with great success.

3. The Cultural animator and Choir Director

The renowned choirs founded by Nicolae Ștefu enjoyed the participation of important people, such as the ones mentioned above, but also of the great cultural animator and publicist, Iosif Vulcan, member of the Romanian Academy since 1891, the manager-founder of the *Familia* magazine. Knowing his competence in organizing choir concerts and his virtues as a director, ever since the time when Ștefu used to hold famous performances in Șiria, to which Iosif Vulcan had participated, being also present at the performances organized by the craftsmen from the *Progress Society*, he decided to write a piece inspired by the social classes, entitled *Dire poverty* "a comedy about peasants, with songs, in one act" presented for the first time in Arad on 6/18th of June 1894, the second day of Pentecost, by the "Romanian artisans youth, under the direction of teacher Nicolae Ștefu, in the hall of the Padurița". This honorable dedication was printed on the cover of the piece. Ștefu also participated in the cultural events organized by the socialist workers, where he used to play the violin, proving his great talent as an instrumentalist. Of course, the media, particularly the *Romanian* newspaper, took objective notes of the cultural events, while subjectively making ironic comments on the ideological aspects presented during the socialist meetings. It should be noted that among these great artistic events, organized and led by Nicolae Ștefu, was and operetta *Crai Nou (The New Moon)* presented on stage at the beginning of 1895 by the *Romanian craftsmen Choir* in Arad, which was the third performance of the first Romanian operetta, composed by Ciprian Porumbescu, after the two that took place in Brasov, at the *Andrei Saguna* High School, in 1882, during the composer's lifetime. With no music sheet for the operetta, Ștefu wrote to Iraclie Porumbescu in Frătăuți-Bucovina, his friend Ciprian's father, to provide him the notes. Among the arguments that convinced father Iraclie was that of "urging to progress our beloved Romanian young craftsmen here (in Arad n. n.)". The printed invitation to the operetta is kept at the Theatre Museum in Arad, a branch of the county Museum, thanks to the kindhearted collector Iosif Sîrbuț.

Between the 6th and the 19th of June 1906, Nicolae Ștefu was part of the Arad delegation who attended the festivities organized on the 40 years celebration of the Romanian Kingdom and the *General Romanian Exhibition*, organized on this

occasion in Bucharest, on the Filaret Hill (today the *Carol I Park*). It was led by Șt. Cicio-Pop and Vasile Goldiș. George Coșbuc, Octavian Goga and Emil Monția accompanied the representatives from Arad, as well as a group of Macedo-Romanian from Voivodina and the Serbian Wallachian space. Aurora Ștefu accompanied her father as well. She was a student at the "Otetelișeanu" Institute in Bucharest - Magurele, whose headmaster was Ioan Slavici. Amale peasants' choir from Șiria, led by Nicolae Ștefu was also a part of the delegation, participating in the choir competition organized during this important historical event.

Between 1890 and 1891, Nicolae Ștefu directed the Romanian Orthodox Cathedral Choir of Arad, and later only occasionally. Due to this activity and to the unanimous recognition from both the clergy and the people present at the service, Nicolae Ștefu was requested to found the *Romanian Orthodox Church Choir in Budapest*, event that took place in 1903, having as members the same people who made up the *Romanian Craftsmen' Choir* from the Hungarian capital, which was also founded by Ștefu in 1902. Among the members of his prestigious Orthodox church choir from Budapest, there was Dimitrie Birăuțiu - editor of the *Romanian people* newspaper, member of the Romanian National Party, Ion Flueraș and Iosif Jumanca, both socialists, who, on the 1st of December 1918, became Board members of the Romanian Central Council and of the Ruling Council, in Alba Iulia, then deputies in the Romanian Parliament, both of whom were killed in the communist prisons, the first one in Gherla (1953) and the second one in Jilava (1949).

4. The Composer

One of his major concerns was to collect folklore from Transylvania and Banat. He worked on it, using the melodies in his secular and religious compositions. He wrote theater music for the *Prayer in Chizătău* (1893), folklore comedy with songs, in one act, by Iosif Vulcan, and also for *Dire poverty* (1894), Vulcan's comedy mentioned before, as well as *St. George's Night* (1903), vaudeville in two acts by Teohar Alexe.

His composing activity began with carols distributed in bundles, brochures or calendars, an activity which he continued for the rest of his life. For teaching chants at school, during the religion classes, Ștefu composed the *People's Liturgy*, to be sung in two parts, for church and school choirs, published in 1896. This liturgy was written based on old church music for pupils' choir (soprano and alto) and edited at the *C.G. Roeder* Lithography Institute in Leipzig in two editions.

Enjoying success and encouraged by it, Nicolae Ștefu, collected, amended, added and drew up a new edition, to be sung in four parts, for mixed choir, based on

the church music and the folklore music of the Arad area. On the 5th/17th of April 1898, Ștefu published a form letter in *The People's Tribune*, announcing the printing of the liturgy to be sung in four parts, stating that he would add, towards the end "*Christ, Thy resurrection*" and "*more irmoses and prayers, funeral hymns and more folksongs, some original and some by other authors. Printing will be done in Leipzig (Germany)*.... *The liturgy will be drawn up so that it can also be sung on two parts only: soprano and alto; or on three parts, sung by children, with a third part singing the bass notes, which are not very low; or on three parts: soprano – alto with bass or with tenor The composition is simple, but beautiful and can successfully performed even by a new choir*". *Saint John Chrysostom' Liturgy with Other national and folklore songs*, among which *The Romanian students' Hymn*, by D. G. Kiriac, *The Turkeys Hora*, with lyrics by Alecsandri and music by Nicolae Ștefu and *The New Hora*, with lyrics and music by N. Ștefu, etc., were selected in the first edition, which was printed in 1899, by the same publishing house in Leipzig. The next edition included, except for Ștefu's compositions, the march *I went to the mountains* (mixed choir), with music by N. Ștefu and lyrics by A. Glogovan, as well as *Forget, mother* (male choir) with lyrics by the poet Ion Tripa. Moreover, *The funeral chant* appeared in the latest edition.

In 1893 he published, in Arad, *The Prisoner's Hora*, for mixed choir, in the context of the Memorandum Trial. In 1895, in Arad, the Diecezana Publishing House printed the 1st edition of the *Christmas carols - made up for the pupils who sing carols at Christmas*. The second edition was published in 1908. In 1897 the arrangement for mixed choir, entitled *Church hymn*, was printed in Arad, and in 1901, also in Arad, *Christ has resurrected*, for mixed choir came to light. The *School Children Prayers and Church Chants* was published at the Diecezana Publishing House, Arad, in 1904, and *The Praised* was printed by the same publishing house. His last composition, *Funeral chants* was printed in Arad in 1914, shortly before Nicolae Ștefu's passing into eternity.

These religious music compositions have represented culture music landmarks for future composers of great virtuosity, such as Tiberiu Brediceanu and Sabin Drăgoi, who recall Nicolae Ștefu's *People's Liturgy* and its impact on their musical destiny in their biography. In the "*Sabin Drăgoi*", published by the Musical Publishing House in 1971, its author, Nicolae Rădulescu, reiterates, from Sabin Drăgoi's confessions, that the *People's Liturgy* was "his first contact with a work of culture music". A fact worth mentioning is that Nicolae Ștefu loved music so much that he entrusted each of his eight children a musical instrument to study and play, and to those without instrumental grace he provided instruction in the vocal art. With this double "quartet" made up of his children - violin, piano, viola, dulcimer and vocals, Nicholas Ștefu assembled a family orchestra that performed in public,

holding classical, but also folklore music concerts at the Post Hall in Arad, the lounge of the "White Cross" hotel and at the National House of Pârneava. His Christmas, New Year and St. Nicholas concerts usually took place among family, in Securii street (Fejsze utca) no. 32, where important people and friends used to gather, and where the fairy holiday season was highlighted by the acoustic beauty of the orchestra and the family members's voices, masterfully led by the virtuoso violinist and conductor Nicolae Ștefu.

Nicholas Ștefu personality was noticed in the field of writing by Nicolae Iorga (a column in the *Sămănătorul* No. 28, July 9 1906, p.559), by Ioan Slavici, I. E. Torouțiu etc., in the field of pedagogy by Onisifor Ghibu, in the field of humor press by Livia Grămadă etc. His contributions in the field of music, musicology and composition are identified and developed in the *Chronicle of the Romanian music*, written by the academician Octavian Lazar Cosma, in his extensive work *Romanian Musicians - Lexicon*, research work of great significance in the history of the Romanian music, signed by musicologist Viorel Cosma. Musicology journals include studies and articles in which Nicolae Ștefu's name is linked to the choir music field, composition, in general and religious music in particular. The Romanian Orthodox Church has promoted, to this today, *Saint John Chrysostom' Liturgy*, a composition which is performed even at the Romanian Patriarchate. radio shows linked Nicolae Ștefu's name to the Romanian Independence Day and to the Romanian music history, especially to the choir music. In recognition for his role as a teacher, journalist, cultural animator, organizer and founder of choirs, as well as composer and conductor, the central and local authorities have raised a bust in Șiria, the work of sculptor Professor Iosif Constantin, where he founded the first choir in the Arad area and a street in the city of Arad was named Nicolae Ștefu.

A hundred years after his passing away, we bring our pious tribute of gratitude and respect to the teacher Nicolae Ștefu for his endeavors and achievements as a man of the land, a fearless fighter for justice and freedom, for the benefit and the enlightenment of his people through school, culture and faith!

I would especially like to mention *Saint John Chrysostom' Liturgy* - "collected, selected, and drawn up by Nicolae Ștefu, teacher from Arad, based on the church music, to be sung on four parts by a mixed choir" (1899).

The writing of the liturgy is harmonious, with an isorhythmic development in the European music style of the century, following faithfully the progression of the divine service. Paying special attention to the melody, the composer directs the voices naturally, sometimes drawing up a meandering melodic line in the soprano score, while leaving the liturgical text progress in all its purity.

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