

Emilia Petrescu – thoughts about Vocal Music and Pedagogy

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Abstract: *In the middle of the communist era, a Romanian singer with talent, music knowledge and ambition, manages the performance of devoting herself to a vast concert-repertoire, not exactly a friendly one with the atheist views of the official doctrine of the proletariat, who recently was installed in Romania after the World War II. Her vocal repertoire included Songs (Lieder) and Oratory, represented by vocal-symphonic works mostly with religious content. But through a high level of professionalism, her well mastered vocal technique and a unique intelligence in mastering the musical phrase, also with a practical temperament, Emilia Petrescu manages to achieve a wide national and European recognition. This article aims to reconstruct some of the artist's thoughts on the art of singing, which I hope will be useful to new generations of singers.*

Key-words: *Emilia Petrescu, singing, vocal technique, pedagogy*

1. Introduction

"Who doesn't know Emilia Petrescu, the great singer with a pure voice of bells, with an unmistakable perfection of vocal technique, with a breath that bridges more than 10 measures, of the most difficult coloratura?" – wrote in April 1969 the German reporter of the newspaper *Neuer Weg*, quoted by musicologist Despina Petecel in her volume of interviews with Romanian artists (Petecel 1995, 213). In 1969, soprano Emilia Petrescu was at the height of a remarkable lyrical career, she achieved already a wide national and international reputation, and received the distinction of the Golden Duchy offered by the University of Göttingen. From the same year also dates the extensive interview with Emilia Petrescu took by Despina Petecel, where we find many details about the art of singing of the Romanian soprano and about the vocal technique he used.

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The present article uses the few remaining written sources related to the activity of Emilia Petrescu, among which of course the recent volume signed by the musicologist Grigore Constantinescu, but also information received directly from the artist. Information from the singing lessons taught by Emilia Petrescu during the year 1997, when the author of the present article had the chance to meet her personally and work together. The article does not analyze the interpretive art of Emilia Petrescu, but focuses on her opinions about the profession of singing.

1.1. Who is Emilia Petrescu?

Soprano Emilia Petrescu (1925-2003) graduated Philosophy University and later, the Royal Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Art in Bucharest. Among her mentors she named the tenor Aurel Alexandrescu, the harpsichordist Kurt Mild and the conductor Constantin Silvestri, the one who founded and the famous Quartet of the Bucharest Philharmonic in which Emilia Petrescu served as soprano. Her solo debut took place in 1948, in Beethoven Symphony IX and her career focused in time in the concertistic direction, excelling in the Lied and Oratory repertoire, the artist's preferences going to the works of Baroque music and to the songs of Hugo Wolf (Radu 2019). She gave many concerts in Romania and in Europa, she worked as a member of international juries, has taught in Romania, USA and Turkey, has been honored with Romanian, German and American distinctions and has collaborated with leading artists of her time, like Dietrich Fischer Dieskau, Theo Adam, Peter Schreier, Konrad Almen, Karl Voterlre, organist Hans Eckart Schlandt, conductors Constantin Silvestri, Erich Bergel, George Georgescu, Iosif Conta, Herbert Kegel, Igor Markevitch, Paul Kletzky, Pierre Boulez. She died at the Pasărea Monastery. 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 (Radu-Giurgiu 2019, 243).

2. Elements of vocal technique taught by Emilia Petrescu

"A soloist who does not sing *col fiato* (mit dem Atem singen) but *sul fiato* (auf dem Atem singen). It is a real delight to hear how the artist creates colorful phrases with large dimensions (up to 13 measures!), reach in ornaments. She has mastered the technique of support and the technique of big interval jumps. The intonation, the

rhythm and the precision are exemplary”. These are some lines written in 1969 about Emilia Petrescu, in a chronicle in the *Fono forum*, quoted by Grigore Constantinescu in his book (Constantinescu 2014, 94). Emilia Petrescu often insisted on this important aspect from the Italian technique of singing: leading the musical phrase on the fluency of the air, with a correct projection of the sounds in the space of the concert hall (with direction, focus and precision, often on *apnea*) and not to consume the air by pressing and thickening the voice to massive sounds. She considered absolutely fundamental the aspect of breathing in the singing technique and this was the very first thing she dealt with when she started teaching to a new student.

“Breathing is the most important thing in singing!” she used to repeat us, not forgetting to reveal the basic rules regarding the discipline of breathing in professional practice:

- The correct breathing is the deep, inter-costal, not the superficial one (practiced by most of the people, when they are shrugging their shoulders). Even when during a show or concert you have to breathe briefly and quickly in a musical phrase, this breath must be deep, with the ribs expanding in the outside.
- You must learn and master the technique of apnea, air retention. This will help you both for a precise focus on sound attack, for a longer expiration in large musical phrases, as well as for a better precision in fast coloratura passages and in other elements of vocal virtuosity.
- Breaths should be fixed from the beginning, when you start studying a new score. This is the first thing you note on the score, with logic, to serve the musical phrase. In singing, you may never breathe in the middle of a word. Once fixed, you respect the breaths with justice, throughout the study, to get into the reflex and the lungs to get used to them and with the effort of the musical phrases of different lengths.
- During the breaks, when another voice is singing or the orchestra is playing, it is very important to calm your breath and control it: it must be regular, wide and quiet! The purpose is to relax your body and the larynx.
- “Breathing should be practiced also separated from singing and it is good to practice a sport in this regard: swimming, or better walking and climb on the mountain – which is delight for the spirit, steeling the will and resistance, but also developing the lung capacity. Because when you go up, you have to set a controlled breath so you don't get tired”. Mrs. Emilia Petrescu often told me that during her career, if you wanted to know where she was, there were only 3 possibilities: in the concert hall, in the practice room, or on the mountain! Sometimes her husband was waiting for her with boots and all the sports

equipment and in the evening, after the concert, they went directly to the mountain!²

- In order to practice breathing Mrs. Emilia Petrescu recommended certain physical exercises but also certain vocalizations that she preferred for the dosing and directing of the air in the professional emission. Among them, the famous triolets³, on one octave or even on the ambitus of two octaves (for the most advanced) - which, in addition to a wide breathing, demands agility and intonational precision:



Fig.1. Vocal exercise on octave ambitus

Another important technical aspect is the emission of the vocal sound. Mrs. Emilia Petrescu was extremely demanding with this aspect, always asking her students for a sound with penetrating, bright, well-sustained and precise intonation:

- All the air must be put "in the sound". Do not leave any quantity of the air to flow near the sound as it will give a parasitic effect or a feeling of deconcentrating the emission. The sound does not have to be thought "massive" but very penetrating!
- In order to have a good intonation, all sounds must be equal in intensity (for the homogeneity of the phrase) and sung with "Glanz", brightness!
- The correct sound emission is not made by pushing or forcing the voice. The sound should be launched especially towards the head register (Emilia Petrescu often spoke to us about the *Kopfstimme* concept)

² Dr.Ioan Cironeanu, the artist's husband remember: "Emilia really liked to walk on the mountain and she had a pretty hard backpack, which she was carrying in the back. I asked her why she was carrying so much weight. And he told me the following thing: I take him because climbing the mountain I develop my chest capacity. For her the mountain, nature, was something holy." (from an interview by Gr.Constantinescu, *op.cit.*, pag.424-425)

³ Bianca Manoleanu, appreciated Romanian singer of Lied and Oratory, disciple of Emilia Petrescu, remembered about her teacher: "As you entered the corridor leading to her classroom, the most beautiful voice was heard. It belonged to Mrs. Emilia, who made triplets on two octaves. At sixty! What accuracy, what beauty of sound she had, what purity! Something incredible!" (quoted by Gr.Constantinescu, *op.cit.*, pag.233)

- The diaphragm prepares the sound emission: by toning the abdominal muscles, the diaphragm (which is an involuntary muscle, but essential in the respiratory process) must be prepared and raised as for a half-tone or even a tone over the sound you must emit, in order to have a "safe approach of the sound" and to sing lightly. So sustaining the air column is a process that strongly demands certain parts of the body. It is ideal to know which areas are activated and which remain (and should be) relaxed in the singing process.
- High notes (in the top register) should not be sung in force. In the head-register, the sounds are more penetrant and have many decibels, they have a natural glow. That is why if we force them further they will become shrill, "screamed". The high notes should be approached with a very high press on the diaphragm and concentrated vocal chords (tonic, not left unchecked), on a wide, comfortable sound.
- Also related to the emission and articulation of the sound, Emilia Petrescu pointed out that the diction should never be neglected, because it helps in the correct setting. In addition, it enhances the brightness of the sound.

Finely acquainted with the Baroque style, she could work for hours on a single score, a single aria or a single phrase. From the intensity or linearity of the vibrato, to the fair and clear dynamic variations, from the articulation in *legato* or *non-legato*, to the precision of the ornaments (which she insisted that must be rendered "in style"). To those who wish to read more about these aspects, I suggest you consult the interview released by Despina Petecel in 1995, where Emilia Petrescu exemplifies no less than eight kinds of type of trills specific to baroque music! (Petecel 1995, 230-234)

3. Approaching the Vocal Repertoire

"A true history of music could be reconstructed by listening to her recordings, either from the concert or from the studio: Monteverdi, Dowland, Carissimi, Pergolesi, Schütz, Bach, Händel, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Wolf, Berlioz, Franck, Respighi, Debussy, Ravel, Szymanowski, Honegger, Stravinsky, Britten, Enescu, Jora, Drăgoi, Bentoiu (...) Emilia Petrescu was among the first Romanian performers who approached Renaissance and Baroque music, promoting a non-vibrated singing technique, which gave great accuracy to the vocal lines, in perfect accordance with the style of those times" wrote musicologist Olguța Grigorescu" (Constantinescu 2014, 327).

Although she rarely approached the genre of opera, dedicating herself exclusively to the symphonic and chamber vocal genres, Emilia Petrescu strongly

believed in versatility and in her entire career proved to be a versatile artist, approaching musical works written in different musical styles, from different epochs: from Renaissance to the modern one. The *absolute interpreter* that Emilia Petrescu imagined is open to experiment and embrace the innovations from the works of his contemporaries, but he is also an authentic explorer of the musical treasures of the past, using his musical talent, intuition, intelligence but also a vast culture, his seriousness and constant work. "Neglecting the theoretical disciplines you cannot become a total singer" often said the artist (Constantinescu 2014, 292). "If an interpreter wants to understand and reproduce to say a piece in Baroque style, it is useful to read literary pieces belonging to the respective century, to know works of plastic art (painting, sculpture, architecture), to use all the means to get information on the characteristics of the time, so as to draw conclusions on the interpretation of the musical piece, while also putting the imprint of his personality" said Emilia Petrescu (Constantinescu 2014, 312-313).

Another interesting aspect in the musical thinking of the artist is her conception of elaborating the optimal construction of a Lied Recital, a genre about she said that "is a musical jewel, a creation of intense living, in which a deep drama, an ecstatic state of happiness or tranquility, or contemplation takes place in the minimum of time, with maximum depth, intensity." (Constantinescu 2014, 167) Emilia Petrescu warned that in order to have a program that will keep the audience attentive and captivated, "a recital must present an alternation in its composition: slow and lively pieces, long and short pieces, variations on the same theme or varied themes. All, in their succession, must take into account the (minor-major) tone, the theme, to keep the listeners attentive" (Constantinescu 2014, 166)

4. References regarding vocal study and pedagogy

Emilia Petrescu was particularly sharp in the study voice with her students. Basic principles of singing were explained clearly and then practiced with tenacity, long periods of guidance, because she was convinced that it is necessary to always work correctly to form a correct reflex.

At the beginning of the study with a new student she insisted for long periods only on technical exercises, much later going to study the repertoire⁴. She

⁴ Bianca Manoleanu confesses in an interview that she was exasperated that at lessons with Emilia Petrescu she was not allowed to sing anything, the first four years of study focused almost exclusively on the study of vocal technique: "I was crazy because I could take any score and sing it at that moment. But she didn't let me sing anything! Nothing at all! And she said to me: Until you have two equal octaves [in voice] you're not allowed to sing. Why should you work to put every sound of

stated that it is essential to be focused and attentive when you study in order to sing correctly and any sound emitted to be well-tuned and sustained. You can check for sure when you sing correctly and when not: seeing if you are tired! – repeated she often. When you sing correctly, you do not get tired as much as you sing, certainly keeping the natural proportions. But when you sing wrong, you get tired quickly, your voice loses its radiance and it can develop even the hoarseness. Everything shows that you need to stop and see where you went wrong.

There are many qualities required to define a professional singer: “The *solfegio* must be known exceptionally! No less important is the voice pose. The singer is also asked for a rhythmic precision of the clock. To all this is associated the culture related to the great poetry. Quality voice is not everything. If it is not associated with an efficient voice technique, to which is added the deepening of a vast culture, the voice – even the gold one – is not enough to reach the high performance” (Constantinescu 2014, 286, 305).

In addition to the study of the vocal instrument, Emilia Petrescu insisted on the necessity of a specialized musical preparation (music theory, notions of musical forms and harmony, music history) and an open cultural view (including information about art history, works of the great authors of classical literature, knowledge of some fundamental elements of psychology, aesthetics, rhetoric, philosophy and not least, knowledge of foreign languages) – for an optimal formation of a professional singer. “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” (Constantinescu 2014, 295). Very often the few hours in the university study program are not enough to complete the training of a young person. Emilia Petrescu pointed out these limits: “The University singing teachers do not always succeed, because of the short time they have at their disposal and because the student is in a permanent intellectual and vocal transformation, so they do not always succeed in forming a student until end. That is why you need to find a teacher who will take you and teach you beyond the 4 or 5 years of the University, in order to thoroughly yourself all the styles and all the important works in the vocal repertoire” (Petecel 1995, 219). In addition, it is worth saying that generally in the vocal training the

the song in your voice? Why? When you're ready, take your voice *out of the pack* and ... sing.”
(quoted by Gr.Constantinescu, op.cit., p. 228)

singing studios are based on individual classes and the teacher must adapt his method to each disciple, individually. "The same vocal technique and the same procedures cannot be applied to all students. On the contrary, each one must give it according to its psychic structure, according to its development and its possibilities. With some you have to work slower, with others faster and not according to the same criteria, but according to the criteria chosen by you, as a teacher, depending on their mental and intellectual capacity" (Petecel 1995, 246). Without complete the subject or the thoughts of the wonderful soprano Emilia Petrescu, I conclude here this short article with an aspect that I have always appreciated: her courage and determination not to refuse to study any score, no matter how technically demanding was is, no matter how difficult and complex it would have been on interpretative way. You have to love the challenges and you don't have to go back in front of any score, she always encouraged us. Moreover, in order to achieve something difficult, you have to do exercises on something even harder, on an even more difficult score. "I used all my mental and physical resources to see where I can reach, how far I can go and how I can use my own being to achieve something" (Emilia Petrescu-Petecel 1995, 224).

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