

## Aspects of musical time in the work of composer Doina Rotaru. Case study: *Clocks*

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**Abstract:** *Concepts such as time and memory are defining elements in the music of composers from Romania. A specific case is composer Doina Rotaru's work, "Clocks", where the theme is explicit. The current study analyses throughout the composition how various facets of time (objective time, measuring instruments, inner time, subjective time, and circular time) are musically highlighted through compositional techniques such as precision of form, slow developments, interplay of musical syntax, and ingenious orchestration.*

Key-words: *objective time, subjective time, memory, orchestration*

### 1. Introduction

In the later decades of the 20th century, we observe attempts by Romanian composers to draw close to the primordial values of ancient civilisations, by finding archetypes and the sonic essence of this world, sometimes even within the sound itself (Anghel, 1997). Personalities such as: Myriam Marbe, Tiberiu Olah, Anatol Vieru, Aurel Stroe (in some of his works), Ştefan Niculescu (through the use of a Neo-Byzantine style), Doina Rotaru, and Octavian Nemescu, through their constant inclination towards non-European cultures, represent just a narrow list of creators who aim to reclaim value, and thereby, musical temporality. I will further illustrate how the issues of time and memory appear in a **contemporary Romanian** musical work that explicitly addresses these themes.

### 2. Discussion

Composer Doina Rotaru writes music primarily subordinated to the coherence of sentiment, directed towards a teleology of affect. In all her works, time is

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manipulated through an effort to remember the primordial elements in a Platonic sense, of pre-existence and emergence from the depths. Her declared preference for rendering cultural archetypes and sublimated, essentialised folklore, as well as the return to the primordial elements of existence and, why not, music, characterise her work and define her aesthetic choices.

One of the works where the manipulation of time is observed most clearly is “Clocks III” for large orchestra, a reorchestrated version (thus rethought in terms of section dimensions, some compressed, others dilated) of the piece “Clocks” for Trio Contraste. Other versions of the same composition include “Clocks” for the chamber ensemble Archeus, conducted by Liviu Danceanu, and for chamber orchestra, entitled “Clocks II”.

In Romanian, the title of the piece refers to two meanings: “ceas” - hour (thus space-time) and “ceas” as a time measuring instrument. The sections of the work can be identified, in terms of the clock as a time measuring instrument, as follows:

- ^ *mechanical clocks*, as precise, undisturbed rhythmic grids, through equal pulsation and rhythm of musical events;
- ^ *hourglasses*, musically characterised by slow flows, suggesting timelessness; and
- ^ *timepieces*, materialised in areas more deprived of sonic agglomerations.

The first section, marked as **A**, lasts for 33 bars and consists of an accumulation of different overlapping pulsations. Orchestration-wise, the piece starts with non-pitched percussion sounds (two anvils, small bells, cowbells, gongs), then muffled piano sounds are added, followed by pizzicato strings and instruments belonging to pitched percussion (crotales, glockenspiel) and finally, the wind instruments, all grafted on a pedal on E. In bar 24, there is a descending motif played by the woodwinds. This *descensio* in suggestive trills appears three times, the last occasion dilated in time, clearly a premonitory element for the next section - the insertion of the hourglass into the pulsating clock. In the example below, a “portion” from the fourth page of the work, without strings and incomplete percussion, but where the second and third appearance of the *descensio* motif can be observed, framed by the regular, distinct pulsation in each instrument.

Fig.1- bars 26-30

In the second section, **B** (b.34-49), the slow flow of time through the hourglass and the *distinct* conquest of space are suggested by the previously mentioned *descensio*, but orchestrated in an exemplary way, with a different “functional” division between the wind instruments and the strings. Thus, from the flow in the high register to the low register, we can distinguish two well-defined textures.

Several techniques are employed in creating these textures: the **repetition** of the *descensio* motif in the strings, first appearing in flageolets, then amplified within the range of a ninth, and then lowered by approximately two octaves until it reaches the low register of each string.



Section **C** of the composition (b. 50-94), a *timepiece*, is more extensive, where the previously stated elements will now be developed and thus, find a new way of expression. The pulsations (clocks) become slower and are interrupted by reminiscences of “hourglass” moments, present in the middle and low register of the wind instruments. The slow *descensio*, doubled by heterophony of micro-melodies, transforms into a chromatic sonic substance here, and the E pedal from the first part is replaced by the D note, as a natural consequence of the shift of space towards the low register in Section B. Gradually, another layer, *diatonic*, appearing in bar 63 with the violins and immediately in the horns, amplifies by adding violas, trombones, bassoons, and second violin. The dominance of the diatonic layer is reinforced by the appearance of a melody (b. 73) on bells, vibraphone, and piano. The melodic harmonic structure, as well as its giusto rhythm, is grafted onto a Byzantine-style melos.

This melos will be taken over and dilated through the same heterophonic procedures mentioned earlier, with violins, clarinets, horns, and flutes. The direction of the register extension is towards the high register at bar 88, once the high register is reached, the Byzantine monody is reiterated by glockenspiel, crotales, vibraphone, and piano, but this time with added appoggiaturas, changing its character to a more essentialised folkloric one. This detail is highlighted by the introduction of the blockflöte alongside the piccolo flute, in a continuous crescendo covering both the low register (low strings) and the high register. The culmination occurs naturally because its constituent elements were previously stated.

If we briefly recapitulate, up to this point in the composition, a clear progression can be observed from pulsation, which can signify the original rhythm, movement, and time, to a melody rendered heterophonic, expressing spatiality and coherence.

At the beginning of Section **D** (b. 95-111), there is a break in the low register, while the monody transformed into a complex heterophonic texture continues for 4 measures on flutes, blockflöte, and ocarinas.

From the melos on the glockenspiel, only the appoggiaturas remain, interrupted by a pause, superimposed on a diatonic cluster in the extremely high register of the strings. From these pauses, the pulsation gradually re-emerges for all instruments, starting with the piano, triangle, and gong. At bar 100, the indication “*Mecanico*” emphasises the regaining of the initial “clock”. For six bars, the inherent rhythm of each voice is established, followed by a tempering of the discourse from bar 106. The pulsation, although still present, becomes slower, and a new shift towards the low register occurs.

Fig. 4. bars 95-99

Section E (b. 112-129) returns the idea of melody to the foreground, this time concentrated in a single instrument, the clarinet, which synthesises the previous efforts to create continuity and, through it, an escape from the initial time. The melodic “giusto” from Section C transforms into “rubato”, and the muted strings, second clarinet, and flutes add to the melos. They resume the motif of the hourglass (the glissando), but reversed, ascending instead of descending.

The pulsation returns with Section F (b. 129-141) in the vibraphone and strings, while the melos is transferred to the flute. It is a superimposition as objective and transparent as possible of the two extremes: maximum continuity (represented by the melody) and obsessive rhythmic elements.

It is interesting to note that the violas act as a link between these two extremes, because the pulsation is created through *accents* rather than *pauses*.

Fig. 5. bars 129-134

In Section **G** (b.142-155), the woodwinds gradually join the strings and percussion, reaching a tutti in *ff* (b.155). They disperse the melody of the flute in a heterophonic way. The spraying of the melody creates a diatonic texture, with a folkloric character, in *ascensio*, while the *descensio* is present in the strings. The accumulation takes on the appearance of a truly tense sonorous fan, leading to the creation of another dilated time, as it appears in Section **H** (b.156-170). Here, the pulsation is much more rarefied, reminiscent of a primordial, uncreated time. The hourglass-type clock overlaps with this pulsation, so the last seven measures of the section materialise in a slow descent, with a heterophonic character in the low wind instruments.

The final *descensio* continues at the beginning of Section **I** (b.170-190), which constitutes the conclusion of the work. From the slow pulsation, the rhythm of equal quavers is recreated, encompassing the entire orchestra, from the middle to the high and low registers. The short values are distributed in a cluster around the first E (D sharp, D natural, C sharp, and F). The only exception is the timpani, which seems to synthesise all previous events through *tremolo*, *glissando*, and short values, as in a genuine melody grafted onto one of the most rhythmic and dramatic instruments.

The brief presentation of this work, a true lesson about manipulating different types of time in succession or in polyphony, cannot be concluded without mentioning the role of memory in their construction. It is not a music of motifs that demands the memory of sound material, but a music of grand gestures with the value of an idea. That's why every novelty is first introduced subtly, in a profound Beethovenian spirit of continuous development. Moreover, all elements are organically exploited, so the transitions occur, if necessary, by skipping several sections, which requires a superimposed and simultaneously interchangeable memory<sup>2</sup>. Composer Doina Rotaru establishes the landmarks of her composition not through the classical system of cadences<sup>3</sup>, but by revealing, one by one, the different stages of the piece's journey, making it easier to recognise them even in the most surprising situations. Memory here, therefore, serves as a means of *psychic modulation*, completely absorbing the recipient into the real time, that is, the sentimental aspect of the work.

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<sup>2</sup> The problem of reception of music with the help of memory using the theory of information (Abraham Moles), is widely explained by composer Octavian Nemescu in his study „Comunicare si receptie muzicală”, in *Arta modernă și problemele percepției artistice*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1986

<sup>3</sup> It is not a matter of tonal cadences, but of the principle of their existence in music one way or another.

### 3. Conclusions

The work of Doina Rotaru, *Clocks*, constitutes a true lesson about manipulating time in music, accomplished in a Beethovenian spirit and with influences from the East, using contemporary means to emotionally modulate different types of time, with the help of memory processes. An original aspect is that her orchestration techniques (*e.g.*: assigning distinctive roles to the orchestral compartments, developing the timbral aspect throughout the score in order to create memory cues) shape the form of the musical piece. All these represent a good model for future generations of composers, because Doina Rotaru's clarity of intentions, subdued to the primary idea and feelings, help other creators organize their sound Universe in a coherent manner.

### 4. Proposals

Romanian music, from Enescu to the present day, has a specific relationship with temporality and the principles of memory. While representatives of the post-war generation have been extensively analysed (Olah, Vieru, Niculescu, Stroe, and Marbe), the newer generation of composers, those who use multimedia and extramusical expressive means in their creations, propose a brave discourse, involving cultural memory and profound considerations on current technological phenomena that influence the perception of time in a profoundly original manner and which need to be further explored.

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