

The bassoon between tradition and avant-garde in the Romanian school (last half of the 20th century beginning of the 21st century)

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Abstract: *This article explores the evolution of the bassoon in the Romanian school of music from the late 20th century to the beginning of the 21st century. It examines the cultural and political context that influenced the development of the Romanian school of composition and the diversification of artistic currents. The article highlights the technical improvements in the bassoon and the contributions of Romanian bassoonists in expanding the repertoire for the instrument. It also discusses the exploration of new effects and sounds in contemporary compositions. The article showcases notable works in the Romanian school of music, including Nicolae Brânduş' "Melopedie & Fugue," Maya Badian's "Capriccio," Ştefan Niculescu's "Monophonie – Sonata," and Violeta Dinescu's "Satya II." Overall, the article emphasizes the fusion of tradition and avant-garde elements in the Romanian school of music and the continuous push to expand the boundaries of the bassoon.*

Key-words: *bassoon, avant-garde, traditional, solo musical works, Romanian school*

1. Cultural and political context

After a long study of the technical and interpretative possibilities of the bassoon and a close connection with the composers of the 21st century, an impetuous desire was created to show another dimension of this instrument. The bassoon, a woodwind instrument with a rich history, has long been associated with its role in orchestral settings. However, recent developments in the field of music composition have prompted a reevaluation of the bassoon's potential as a solo instrument. This paper aims to explore the technical and interpretative possibilities

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of the bassoon, as well as the transformative impact of contemporary composers on its perception and role.

1.1. The Promotion of National Ideas and Cultural Policies and the Development of the Press

To comprehend the emergence and growth of the modern and contemporary Romanian school, it is imperative to consider the cultural and political backdrop. Within the European cultural sphere, the promotion of nationalistic ideals and the implementation of cultural policies, often assumed by the state, particularly in terms of enhancing education, have resulted in an unprecedented proliferation of artistic movements. This has led to the cultivation of public interest in artistic expressions and, more significantly, the amplification of culture's social role. This has provided writers and artists with a platform to articulate their opinions and convictions before a wide-ranging audience. The advent of the press and the subsequent increase in publications have facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and fostered a heightened enthusiasm for education and reading, thereby elevating cultural life to new heights. This cultural effervescence within the Romanian media has invigorated Romanian creators and rapidly shaped the contemporary public, akin to the trajectory observed in traditional Western European nations.

In the 20th century, following the transformative effects of the Second World War on people's lifestyles and mindsets, artistic figures continued to innovate the language, means, and techniques of artistic expression across all domains of art. These innovations were in line with the prevailing historical and social context, addressing contemporary issues. The proliferation of mass culture and mass consumption has engendered a homogenization of public preferences, imposing new behavioral norms, particularly as a consequence of standardization and technological advancements.

1.2. The Role of Technology

The proliferation of audio technology, television, cinema, and advanced sound storage systems, including computer technology, has given rise to novel forms of artistic expression. Musical performances have expanded to encompass a wide range of settings, transitioning from collective experiences to more intimate and private settings. The continuous advancements in the quality of musical instruments have facilitated their manipulation through high-performance technical means, such as distortion, processing, and transformation of instrumental, vocal, or noise sounds, utilizing various editing techniques. The

widespread commercialization of recordings and listening equipment has resulted in increasingly higher quality performances.

2. The Romanian School of Composition

Within the European musical landscape, Romanian musical creation holds a prominent position, both in terms of the substantial number of composers who have received training in local institutions or in esteemed European schools with a rich heritage, and in terms of the artistic value of their compositions. These compositions often draw inspiration from elements of Romanian tradition and spirit, contributing to the distinctiveness and cultural richness of Romanian music.

2.1. Collaboration with European Conservatories

Although the establishment of the Romanian musical composition school occurred relatively late, towards the end of the 19th century, it successfully gained recognition within the European musical landscape. This achievement was primarily attributed to the local talents who diligently acquired the necessary knowledge to elevate the standards of professional training. Notably, close collaborations between Romanian Conservatories and prestigious institutions in Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and Rome played a pivotal role in this process. Furthermore, the integration of young concert performers and accomplished instrumentalists from abroad into the Romanian cultural milieu also contributed significantly to the advancement of Romanian education.

Moreover, the heightened interest in new musical trends can be attributed to the initiatives and innovations witnessed throughout the 20th century in European music. A substantial number of composers embraced new compositional techniques, thereby enriching the musical landscape. These composers skillfully blended their innovations with the foundations of the old musical culture, demonstrating a deep respect for tradition while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of artistic expression. This integration of tradition and innovation has been a defining characteristic of Romanian music, allowing for a dynamic and diverse musical heritage.

2.2. Integration of Romanian Tradition and Spirit

The Romanian school of composition made significant inroads into European musical art, particularly in the 20th century. This was achieved through the distinct

expressiveness of the tonal-modal systems employed in the compositions, the incorporation of local folklore elements, and the exploration of experimental approaches. These experimental approaches encompassed research into acoustic zones, timbral and instrumental effects, the utilization of heterophony, spectral music, the integration of electroacoustic apparatus, the incorporation of percussion effects, innovations in the utilization of noises and newly invented instruments, as well as the inclusion of specific folk instruments.

As a result of these innovative directions, the 20th century can be regarded as a period marked by an abundance of increasingly personalized musical styles. Notably, a variety of innovations emerged and gained prominence within specific time periods over the past century. These trends also permeated Romanian music, merging with the national specificity. Noteworthy examples include modalism, impressionism, expressionism, constructivism, atonalism, noisism, serialism, stochastic music, alongside the continued presence of neoclassicism and music rooted in folkloric traditions. The amalgamation of these diverse influences has contributed to the rich and multifaceted musical landscape of Romanian music.

2.3. Musical Styles and Innovations

Over time, the pursuit of captivating musical scores to satiate the desire for novelty and the increasingly refined tastes of listeners has led to a diversification of ideas about music and compositional techniques. These ideas have presented controversial perspectives and, notably, have engendered a profound departure from musical tradition, impacting all aspects of music, from melody and rhythm to form and tonal system. This departure has been characterized by an increasing freedom of expression.

The contemporary music landscape encompasses a vast palette that has the potential to cater to various sensibilities. However, despite this breadth, not all sensibilities are satisfied. Despite the challenges faced, music continues to uplift and ennoble the human spirit. This analytical approach is motivated by a desire to address the lack of information and facilitate young people's access to the realm of 20th-century musical creation.

Random music, a novel trend that emerged in the latter half of the 20th century, involves the direct involvement of the performer in the act of creation. In this approach, the composer either allows the instrumentalist to improvise or introduces events related to the mood or audience interaction. Alternatively, the composer may suggest that the performer structure certain moments of the work according to their own choices or even compose an original version within the limits set by the composer in terms of sounds, gestures, or rhythmic organization.

Consequently, both composers and instrumentalists have contributed to the diversification of musical notation. This diversification includes the discovery and utilization of sound effects, unconventional timbral combinations, and the supplementation of scores with extensive captions necessary for the performer to comprehend the composer's message and execute it accordingly. Thus, a collective creation emerges, with both composer and performer contributing to various aspects of the musical work.

Musical minimalism, originating in America and rapidly spreading after 1960, represents another compositional style characterized by consonant harmony and the repetition of short formulas within the musical structure.

3. Expansion of the Bassoon Repertoire

Within the context of the Romanian school of composition, the development of the bassoon has gained significant attention, particularly from the latter half of the 20th century to the early 21st century. Composers have actively explored the possibilities offered by this instrument, incorporating it into orchestral, concertante, and chamber works, as well as within genres of entertainment music. The flourishing of the bassoon repertoire can be attributed to the creation of highly appealing and technically demanding compositions that present a fresh and exciting approach.

The abundance of skilled performers and their ability to achieve high levels of interpretative excellence can be attributed to the meticulous attention given to every aspect of sound production and quality. Increasing emphasis is being placed on the construction characteristics of instruments and concert halls, as well as the investigation of sound and recording quality, which is being conducted with greater thoroughness.

The evolution of the bassoon within the Romanian school of composition has been driven by a desire for novelty, refined musical tastes, and a departure from traditional approaches. This has resulted in a diverse and captivating musical landscape that continues to enrich the cultural heritage of Romanian music.

3.1. Technical Improvement in the Bassoon and Contributions of Romanian Bassoonists

From a technical standpoint, the bassoon has undergone significant improvements throughout the 20th century. Manufacturers in Germany, Russia, the Czech Republic, Japan, and the United States have played pivotal roles in the

development of this instrument. These advancements include an expanded range of three octaves and a fifth, enhanced tuning stability across all registers, increased sound amplitude, and improved accessibility to the upper register.

In Romania, during the latter half of the 20th century, two notable bassoonists, Dimitrie Alexandrescu and Gheorghe Cuciureanu, made significant contributions to the technical development of the instrument, particularly in the lower register. In the early 1980s, at the request of Professor Gheorghe Cuciureanu, composer Nicolae Brânduș composed the work “Melopedie & Fugue” specifically for this improved bassoon. This composition showcases the instrument's enhanced capabilities, allowing for greater ease in playing passages in the lower register.

3.2. Exploring New Effects and Sounds

Performers and composers of the 20th and 21st centuries have consistently sought new techniques and effects that can be produced by the bassoon. The aspiration of every bassoonist is to master and utilize these instrumental possibilities, as contemporary music continually presents challenges, prompting musicians to explore different effects that can imbue the instrument with a more human quality. Consequently, a wide range of sounds can be achieved, including mellow or bright, velvety or piercing, thin or rich in harmonics, each contributing to the overall musical discourse. The timbre of the bassoon can convey a sense of excitement or calm, influenced by factors such as the pressure exerted during performance, the quality of the instrument and the player's technique, the bassoonist's emotional state, and their ability to interpret and bring to life the musical ideas written by the composer in the score, particularly in music from the 17th century. In many instances, especially in 20th and 21st century compositions, composers provide musical ideas and various moods, allowing the performer to contribute their own interpretation and artistic expression to the music.

4. Notable Works for Bassoon in the Romanian School of Music

The evolution of the bassoon can be observed through notable reference works that showcase the instrumentalist in a singular role, particularly in compositions written for solo bassoon. This symbiotic relationship between the performer and the concept of the complex artist transforms the instrumentalist into a dancer and an actor, thereby integrating the performer into the creative act. This complexity,

generated by the composer, allows for a multifaceted artistic expression that goes beyond mere instrumental proficiency.

4.1. Nicolae Brânduș, “Melopedie in the work: Fugue for bassoon”

Nicolae Brânduș composed "Melopedie in the work: Fugue for bassoon" in 1981. This diptych for solo bassoon consists of two pieces that draw inspiration from well-known themes found in the musical literature dedicated to the bassoon. Specifically, these themes include the bassoon melody from the introduction of Igor Stravinsky's "Sacre du printemps" and the broom theme from Paul Dukas' orchestral work "The Sorcerer's Apprentice".

The term "Melopedie" combines two words with similar semantic content: "melody" and "melopedi" a, with the latter referring to slow, rubato-like melodies. The rhythmic structure of the composition is free, as the composer does not adhere to a strict bar-form writing style. This allows for a certain degree of freedom for the performer to shape the highly varied expressive moods within the piece.

4.2. Maya Badian's "Capriccio" for Solo Bassoon

In her composition "Capriccio" for solo bassoon, composer Maya Badian employs traditional notation while allowing the instrumentalist the freedom to organize the sound material. This is achieved by omitting bar lines, which results in a parlando-rubato style, ensuring the fluidity of this avant-garde musical expression.

The rhythmic character of the composition is enhanced using exceptional divisions such as quintuplets, sextuplets, and septuplets, which contribute to an improvisatory quality within the work. The shortest note values encountered throughout the composition are thirtieth notes, which appear in the third section.

4.3. Stefan Niculescu's "Monophonie" – Sonata for solo bassoon

The composition "Monophonie– Sonata for solo bassoon"² was composed by Ștefan Niculescu in 1988. The title, "Monophonie" (derived from the Greek words "monos" meaning "one" and "phone" meaning "voice"), clearly indicates the nature of this work as a solo piece for an instrument, encompassing various dimensions of musical expression and intricate virtuosity. "Monophonie" for bassoon falls within the category of monody, featuring numerous instances of

² Four distinct syntactic categories have crystallized in European and non-European cultic and folk traditions to this day, each irreducible to the other: monody, homophony, polyphony and heterophony. *Revista muzica* number 3, Bucharest, 1973, pp. 10-16.

latent polyphony, which is characteristic of solo instrument writing since the time of Johann Sebastian Bach's sonatas and suites. Many of Ștefan Niculescu's titles reflect his particular interest in syntactic categories³ (Niculescu 1980, 279), such as "heteromorphies", "Unisons", and the "Synchronicity" cycle. The subtitle, "Sonata for Bassoon Solo", refers to the compositional approach employed in the work.

4.4. Violeta Dinescu's "Satya II"

Another significant addition to the bassoon repertoire is "Satya II", composed in 1984 in Heidelberg, Germany, by composer Violeta Dinescu. The title "Satya" derives from Sanskrit, meaning "codex" or "ritual". This work is a monody devoid of traditional bar lines, tonality, and rhythm, yet it maintains thematic unity. The musical language employed is chromatic and lacks a stable tonal center. "Satya II" is a freely evolving composition consisting of three sections: A, B, and C. The musical discourse is characterized by melismas, with the underlying structure built upon sustained notes.

From a notational perspective, the composition incorporates several characteristic signs of the 20th century. These include the absence of bar lines, allowing for a free execution in a *parlando-rubato* style at the performer's discretion, ensuring the fluidity of this avant-garde musical expression. The composer also grants freedom to the performer through the notation of sounds without specified time values, as well as sounds with specified time values. The score includes uniformly accelerated or slowed down values, random values denoted by wavy bars, multiphonic effects, tremolo effects, and a hierarchy of breaths. The notation of pitches follows conventional notation, while rhythmic formulas are carefully attended to, raising questions about tempo organization in the later sections of the piece.

With the absence of regular beats, the control of measures dissipates, resulting in non-measured music. This grants complete freedom to the performer, who must align not with musical time but with real astronomical time (hour, minute, second). The sustained sounds, or non-value sounds, serve as the axis around which the discourse is constructed.

³ Form is an organic development of a syntactic structure (or structures) according to the possibilities and limits of the nature of certain sound objects and, at the same time, an organic development of certain sound objects according to the possibilities and limits of a syntactic structure (or structures). One should not confuse the notion of form with that of the schema of form... "The schema of a form (e.g. the schema of the sonata) is a general pattern that can be embedded in a multitude of distinct particular forms".

In terms of form, an open and free structure is evident. The discourse within the minstructure (cells, motifs) no longer adheres to classical notions of proportion or symmetry. However, the appearance of form can be shaped by the performer's interpretation and organization. The performer is free to create their own form by considering musical segments, repetitions, areas of sparse and dense textures, and their logical organization structured around dynamic areas established by the composer.

The first articulations already require a personal interpretation from the bassoonist, as the non-value sounds may or may not be modulated intonationally. The sound quality of these non-value sounds may present novel and experimental aspects, such as false positions, trills, intonational variations, suggesting quarter or half tones, or simply producing a pure, unvibrated sound. The structure of the composition is developed without any gravitational pull from a "tonic" towards a finalis note.

4.5. Octavian Nemescu's "Combinations in Circles"

The composition "Combinations in Circles" was created in 1965 by Octavian Nemescu for cello or bassoon, tape, and multimedia action. It has been performed in both traditional concert halls and unconventional spaces. According to the composer, the music possesses an ambient quality. The premiere of the work took place in 1965 in a captivating setting on the shores of Lake Tei, where the cellist, accompanied by eight loudspeakers playing pre-recorded music, produced an eerie sound that seemed to emanate from another world. The solo instrument was positioned amidst works of art, including the Mobius Spiral made of tree moss by Wanda Mihuleac. The aspiration for a complete performance and artistic fulfillment led to the integration of contemporary dance, choreographed by Sergiu Anghel, which further immersed the audience in a magical and ritualistic atmosphere.

In 1980, Octavian Nemescu presented a second version of "Combinations in Circles", this time written for ensemble and band. The instrumentation included flute, clarinet in B, bassoon, trombone, two percussionists, viola, cello, and band. The composition is an open work, structured by the composer through seven concentric circles. The concept of the circle and its exploration in musical composition can be traced back to Pierre Boulez's Piano Sonata No. 3 from 1957 and Karlheinz Stockhausen's work "Zyklus" from 1959. These compositions introduced the idea of the circle and paved the way for a new genre of open opera, where performers have the freedom to start from any point, and the score can be read in both directions.

The presence of seven spheres in "Combinations in Circles" is not accidental, as it corresponds to the seven steps of perfection and symbolizes creation and making. In African symbolism, the number seven represents perfection and unity. The composer structured the work in seven steps, mirroring the seven days of creation in the biblical narrative. The circle symbol in the composition can be associated with the image of a snake biting its tail, known as the Uroborus or Ouroboros. This ancient symbol signifies cyclical time, the eternal cycle of creation and destruction, and can also serve as a metaphor for self-reflection, meditation, and self-analysis, suggesting constant renewal and rebirth.

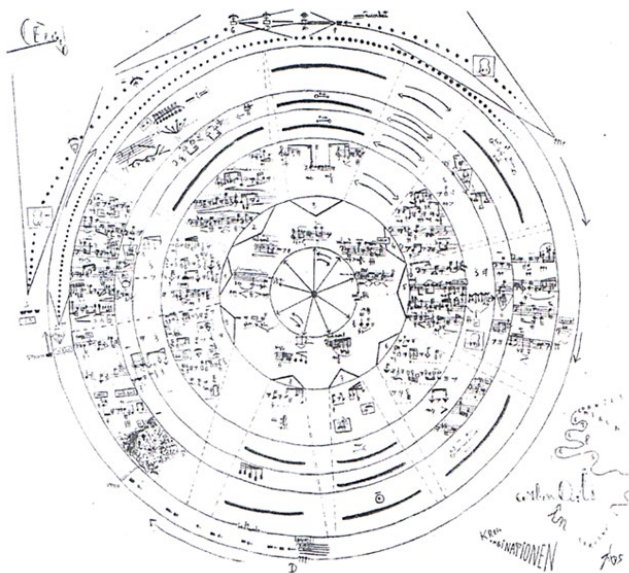


Fig. 1. O. Nemescu – „Combinations in Circles. In Octavian Nemescu's score "Combinations in Circles," the key center of the piece is the note C#, serving as the generating sound with which the work commences and concludes in the low register of the bassoon. The composition is characterized by the instrument player's continuous pursuit of the original sound throughout the piece searching for entering the central circle of C# note"

Within the musical discourse of "Combinations in Circles," there are moments where the bassoon (or cello) creates gaps, allowing the three bands to introduce peculiar sonorities. The first band presents the words "ant" and "mem,"

representing anticipation and memory. The second band anticipates future events or recalls sounds previously experienced by the artist. The final band gradually transforms the sound of crickets, distorting and moving towards lower registers, paralleling the solo instrument's trajectory. In the second version of the composition, the solo instruments also engage in the musical discourse. The band section opens with sounds of running water and long breaths, establishing a static and meditative atmosphere charged with earthly symbolism. The cello enters dynamically, starting from a very soft dynamic level (ppp) and gradually building up to a fortissimo (ff), followed by a calming of the musical discourse, with the sound of the instrument fading away and giving space to earthly sounds.

This concise presentation of representative solo bassoon works is deemed essential for both performers and aspiring young composers interested in writing for this instrument. The choice of compositional approach is left to the discretion of the composer. The pioneers of the younger generations have already paved the way through their compositions, establishing a direction that emphasizes the bassoon's potential through both traditional and avant-garde musical styles.

5. Conclusions

The exploration of the bassoon's technical and interpretative possibilities within the Romanian school of composition has led to a reevaluation of its potential as a solo instrument, influenced by contemporary composers. This evolution has been shaped by the cultural and political context, the integration of Romanian tradition and spirit, and the collaboration with European conservatories, contributing to the distinctiveness and cultural richness of Romanian music. The expansion of the bassoon repertoire has resulted in the creation of highly appealing and technically demanding compositions, exemplifying the diverse and captivating musical landscape that characterizes Romanian music. Notable works for bassoon, such as "Melopédie in the work: Fugue for bassoon" by Nicolae Brânduș, "Capriccio" for Solo Bassoon by Maya Badian, "Monophonie – Sonata for solo bassoon" by Ștefan Niculescu, "Satya II" by Violeta Dinescu, and "Combinations in Circles" by Octavian Nemescu, showcase the instrument's potential and enrich the bassoon repertoire.

Furthermore, the technical improvement in the bassoon and the contributions of Romanian bassoonists, such as Dimitrie Alexandrescu and Gheorghe Cuciureanu, have significantly enhanced the instrument's capabilities, leading to an expanded range and improved sound quality. The exploration of new effects and sounds, alongside the integration of traditional and avant-garde musical styles, has further enriched the bassoon repertoire, providing a platform for both performers and aspiring young

composers to explore the instrument's potential. In essence, the evolution of the bassoon within the Romanian school of composition reflects a continuous pursuit of artistic innovation and expression, contributing to the cultural heritage of Romanian music and positioning the bassoon as a versatile and dynamic instrument within the European musical landscape.

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