

## George Enescu: First Tour in Bessarabia

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**Abstract:** *Interwar Bessarabia was an unknown territory both for the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic and Socialist Romania. Nothing was written on either side of the Prut River. If someone dared to recall an intriguing and much-wanted life between the Prut and Dniester rivers during that period, they were likely to be subjected to lessons of true. At least that was the case in the MSSR. The Democratic Republic of Moldova, established on January 24, 1918, followed by the Declaration of the Country Council on March 27, 1918, breathed fresh air into the region between the Prut and Dniester rivers, a breath that had been absent for over a century. In the very first days of the Great Union, thanks to the warm-hearted Onisifor Ghibu from Ardeal, the greatest musician of all Romanians, George Enescu, arrived in Chisinau from Iasi with his orchestra for a few days' tour. The concerts he presented on March 24, 25, and 28 were events difficult to compare with anything that had occurred over the years, unless we recall the nearly forty concerts given by Enescu himself in various towns of Bessarabia, where, alongside great performers like Nicolae Caravia, he delighted audiences with exceptional music. The significance of these tours is further underlined by the fact that, due to the genius musician, an opera theater was established in Chisinau (premiering "Faust" on August 6, 1918) and the creation of a Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Arts (January 1, 1919).*

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About interwar Bessarabia, nothing, or almost nothing, was known, both in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic and in Socialist Romania. The Soviets did not recommend the study of the socio-cultural and politico-economic life in on the territory that had returned to its motherland, or if something was written, often by order, it was mandatory to ferociously criticize everything that the Government of Bucharest undertook on this mioritic land.

Starting from the 1990s, when democracy stepped on the soil of our countries as well, the interest in studying the history of former Bessarabia increased significantly,

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with a series of representatives from various fields forming a general impression about the life of the inhabitants between the Prut and the Dniester rivers.

As for the research in the cultural-artistic field from that period, until today we will notice too little diligence on the part of the specialists, there being quite a lot of artistic events, which were not analyzed, not studied in depth. The historians of native art still owe us the surfacing of many important events from that period that both specialists and the general public need to know.

As for now, honored audience, I want to refer to the first tour of the great George Enescu in Chișinău, a tour after which more than forty performances of the master in various localities of Bessarabia followed, the presence of the brilliant musician having an invaluable impact on the development of musical culture in the Prut-Dniester space.

How Enescu arrived in Bessarabia we find out from the writings of the illustrious pedagogue, journalist, educator, and memoirist from Ardeal, Onisifor Ghibu (who, by the way, also studied in this charming city, Brașov).

They met by chance in Iași, on November 27, 1917, at the "Marele Cartier General al Armatei" (Great General Headquarters of the Army), where Enescu had requested the release of several talented musicians from the army in order to form a symphony orchestra. Telling the master about the establishment of Sfatul Țării in Chișinău, Onisifor Ghibu invited George Enescu to the capital of Bessarabia to give a concert, quoting, "so that Bessarabians, both Moldovans and Russians, can see that we too have art and great artists." "I gave him my address, writes Onisifor Ghibu, he gave me his, and then we continued to talk about the dramatic political and military events of those days, becoming very close to each other spiritually. A closeness in an extraordinary moment, which later had wonderful consequences. For a quarter of a century, I remained in relations of perfect trust with him" (Ghibu 1990, 363).

I will specify here that empowered by the General Directorate Committee from Chișinău, Onisifor Ghibu had come to Iași to discuss with the leadership of the General Headquarters of the Army about ensuring the security of warehouses, railways, and public order in Bessarabia. Following the approaches of Bessarabian officials, on December 30, the Romanian Government decided to send several regiments to Bessarabia. And on January 24, 1918, as is it known, the Declaration of Independence of the Moldavian Democratic Republic was adopted by Sfatul Țării. That day was also the celebration of the Romanian Army Day. Also, starting from January 24, the newspaper *România Nouă* began to appear instead of the *Ardealul* newspaper, edited by the same Onisifor Ghibu.

On March 17, 1918, the editor-in-chief of the daily *România Nouă* received a letter with the following content: "Esteemed Mr. Ghibu, If I have not come to Chișinău until now, it is because I planned to come with a group of illustrious musicians, that is with an orchestra, so that Bessarabia can see that we have many

talents, and good ones, not just one here and there. Please receive my delegate, Professor Jean Bobescu, who will communicate my projects to you and to whom I ask you, in the name of our art, to give your invaluable support, together with the military and civil authorities in Chişinău: advise him, help him, as you have done for all those who have preceded us, and then success is assured. Please accept all my anticipatory grateful and devoted sentiments, George Enescu."

Before the first concert held in Chişinău by the Iaşi Symphony, conducted by George Enescu, *România Nouă* on March 23, 1918 wrote: "Here is a name so well known and loved beyond the Prut, but completely unknown in Bessarabia. The Prut has been, for a hundred years, such a strong barrier that it has almost completely prevented the spiritual connections between brothers of the same language. Moldovans from Bessarabia knew nothing of what was happening with the Romanians from other parts; they did not know the great men of the nation, nor even those who came out from their midst, such as A. Donici, Al. Russo, B.P. Haşdeu, etc. George Enescu, the unparalleled artist, who will give three great concerts in Chişinău these days, will live on these occasions the most beautiful moments of spiritual uplift and national pride."

Multiple panels announced the concert programs. The first, on March 24, was given for the benefit of Transylvanian refugees. The program included Weber's Oberon Overture, Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 (soloist Nicolae Caravia), Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, and a piece by Saint-Saens.

In the second concert, on March 25, again with maestro Enescu conducting, they performed Svendsen's Paris Carnival, Klughardt's Cello Concerto in A minor (soloist Fluor Breviman), Saint-Saens' Danse Macabre (with Socrate Barozzi on violin), and Beethoven's Symphony No. 5. This program was given for the benefit of the orphans of Moldovan soldiers who have fallen in the war.

During the days of the second concert, Onisifor Ghibu held a public lecture as part of the Moldovan People's University Matinee. About the lecture, the Bukovinian professor Gheorghe Tofan mentioned in *România Nouă* on March 27, 1918, that: "The tone of the lecturer was spirited and firm; he exuded the hope of a stubborn nation, which will not be bent or broken, but is ready to endure new sufferings and to make new sacrifices, decisively fighting until it achieves what no power in the world can ultimately prevent: the unification of the nation." At that lecture, master Enescu and pianist Nicolae Caravia attended, who, at the request of Onisifor Ghibu, performed in the second part of the conference. The same G. Tofan wrote: "Yesterday's matinee was elevated to the level of a true spiritual celebration by the precious contribution of two esteemed artists, sovereign masters of the secrets locked in the mute keys of the instrument that sets souls in motion, elevating them and making them beat together."

“The symphonic concerts under the direction of George Enescu.” This was the title of a chronicle signed by I. Mateiu in *România Nouă* (March 29, 1918), about the first two concerts of the Iași ensemble. Here's what we quote: “If Bessarabia experienced moments of joy at the entry of the Romanian armies, the arrival of the master in Chișinău perfectly completed this joy in the most brilliant way. Moldovans raised in Russian culture, as well as the Russians themselves who hurried to listen to the two symphonic concerts on Saturday and Sunday, were overwhelmed by the performances of the orchestra and the talent of Mr. George Enescu. Following with unusual attention these concerts, the audience did not know what to admire more: the vigor and precision of the orchestra or the admirable baton of the master, enchanted by his brilliant genius. I have literally seen the famous Nikisch from Leipzig, but the impression he left fades in front of the verve, certainty, and subtlety of Enescu. The phenomenal memory with which he retains the most complicated overtures, the superb art with which he nuances all the symphonic subtleties, the brilliant harmony of movements, transformed into music of the hands, are qualities that place Enescu among the genius conductors... Both concerts, with their brilliance, were a revelation, dazzling for the Russians and a definitive victory for Romanian culture. Their deed (Enescu and the orchestra) shattered an injurious conception, signing a belief of respect in Romania of our pains and hopes” (Ghibu 1990, 368).

The third concert was scheduled for March 27. The posters announced a violin recital by George Enescu. However, the truth is that the recital, which included the Tchaikovsky and Saint-Saens Concertos, as well as Lalo's Spanish Symphony, was presented to the public on the evening of March 28. Here is what Onisifor Ghibu writes about this: "I only had a quarter of an hour left to rush to George Enescu's home to inform him that his recital was to be postponed to the next day... (...) 'Maestro,' I greeted him, 'I have come to inform you that your concert must be postponed, given that...' But the maestro, suspecting nothing of what could be the basis of such an inconvenient measure for him, did not let me finish my sentence, but interrupted me, annoyed.

- 'I cannot accept any postponement, for any reason. Such a thing is not in my habit...'

- 'However, maestro, this time, you will accept the postponement, and even be happy that you are given an occasion like the one now for a postponement. Here's what it's about: in half an hour, Sfatul Țării will proclaim the Union of Bessarabia with Romania and in honor of this great event, the concert hall will be transformed into a banquet hall. As a Moldovan, I believe you will rejoice in seeing that the old demesne of Ștefan cel Mare is beginning its process of reintegration, which we hope will soon also complete with Bukovina...'" (Ghibu 1990, 368).

Then Onisifor Ghibu handed the maestro the newspaper where the Declaration of Union and an article related to the event were printed. The head of "România Nouă" confessed that the maestro read with tearful eyes both the article and the declaration of union and said: "Of course, in light of the given situation, I agree both with the postponement of the concert and with Romania up to the Dniester and up to the Tisza. God help us" (Ghibu 1990, 368).

On March 30, in an article titled "Un cuceritor – George Enescu" (Romanian wordplay between "Conqueror" and "Charmer"), also signed by I. Mateiu, *România Nouă* wrote about the third concert: "Just as March 27th marked a victory in the history of our struggles through the union of Bessarabia with Romania, the concerts of maestro Enescu, especially the violin concert on March 28th, constitute an enduring conquest of the Romanian genius. The divine art with which Enescu interpreted the great composers of universal music was so brilliant that the audience, mostly foreign, was completely enchanted. The Russians, who have a serious musical culture and have listened to so many celebrities in Chişinău, realized this time that they were in the presence of an artist of extraordinary proportions. The perfection that unfolded enchantingly, like a nightingale's song, like a sweet dream of fairy tale magic, fascinated the hall, filled to the last place, as only the peaks of genius can do. There was so much magic in the air emanating from the master's bow that a delirium seized the entire audience, who burst into applause and ovations for entire minutes. Constantly called back to the stage, with boundless enthusiasm, Enescu, in his noble generosity, played two unparalleled pieces... being in the state of supreme happiness. A cascade of flowers fell on the stage, at the feet of the maestro. George Enescu was a conqueror of souls. This captivated audience, which did not want to leave the hall, waited for him at the exit, giving him a wonderful hailing such as only the Bucharest people could do. We are proud of this great conqueror that God has given to the Romanian people. Through his genius, our name crosses into the pages of glory of universal history." (Ghibu 1990, 372).

Because there are no recordings, and we have too few testimonies, we turn to the publication of opinions in the press to get a somewhat accurate impression of the historical concerts from the first tour of maestro George Enescu in the capital of Bessarabia. Here is another article about that event, signed in *România Nouă* on March 31, 1918, by Gheorghe Tofan, who reviews the three concerts in question. "In recent days, the souls of Bessarabians have received a new and strong impulse on the path opened. A great and unsurpassed artist, George Enescu, a genius who appears so rarely in the history of a nation, has captivated souls through the divine power of his art, shaking them from the miseries of the day, raising them to the luminous spheres of the eternal ideal. Enescu's arrival in Bessarabia is of epochal importance (...) Through the genius of his art is beyond any comparison, and cannot be depicted, for the language is too poor, the words too

banal and worn, and the pen of the common man too colourless. He has done more for the awakening and strengthening of national consciousness, for raising the national prestige of our nation, than could have been done in a year of persistent propaganda.”

The impression on the audience in Chişinău produced a deep impression on the maestro. “The Theater of Tomorrow” from April 15, 1918, signed with the pseudonym Maurice Bl, wrote: “Although I am not in the habit of giving interviews, but because this time I promised, I will keep my word!” This is how Enescu greeted the representative of the aforementioned newspaper, to continue after a short greeting without being asked the first question: “The reception that was made to me in Chişinău, to me and the orchestra under my direction, produced an excellent impression on all of us. I was awaited at the station by the notabilities of Chişinău and driven with cars into the city. Bessarabians are perfectly hospitable, which is also a traditional custom of the Moldovans. (...). The Bessarabian public knew how to appreciate the true value of the symphonic concerts. The people there are mostly cultured. That’s why they are very spoiled, and we sent them fiddlers, dancers, and operetta artists with *Baba Hârca*, which made our Bessarabian brothers believe that we are more backward than they are. Our concerts, therefore, made a great contrast and were well appreciated. Many parts were encored and repeated.” Maestro Enescu also said in that interview that “... I would like to create there (in Chişinău) not only a musical society but a conservatory and a stable opera with a well-organized orchestra, but this requires large funds. However, something like this must be realized as soon as possible, because, in addition to the formal union that was made, there must also be a spiritual union, to show our Bessarabian brothers that we possess a well-defined culture.”

With the support of George Enescu, who left the violinist Jean Bobescu in the capital of Bessarabia after the mentioned concerts, it was possible on April 6, 1918, to establish the Bessarabian Opera Theater. Charles Gounod's *Faust* was performed, with Jean Bobescu acting as the musical director. Then, on January 1, 1919, the opening of the first Conservatory was announced. It was named the Union Conservatory. Many of my teachers also started their paths at that Conservatory.

Until 1937, the great George Enescu regularly performed in the cities of Bessarabia, contributing fully to the cultural life of the region, both materially (donating his concert fees for various activities) and spiritually, educating the public through exceptional interpretations of interesting programs from the universal repertoire.

## References

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