

The Suite for Piano in the Creation of George Enescu and Constantin Silvestri - Tradition and Originality

Ioan MIHĂILESCU¹

Abstract: *The composers George Enescu and Constantin Silvestri played an important role in the evolution of the piano suite genre in the Romanian music of the 20th century. The Piano Suite in D major op. 10 (1901-1903) by G. Enescu combines elements of baroque origins with elements of French music (present especially in the music of Ravel and Debussy) and elements of folklore influence from genres of Romanian traditional folk music (doinas and dances <joc>). The Suite III op.6 no. 1 (1933) by Constantin Silvestri includes pieces that feature an Expressionist theme. The melody is defined by a fusion between improvisation and rigorous organization. The presence within the same piece of some songs of diatonic structure with intensely chromatic songs stands out. The two suites for piano reflect the concern of the composers G. Enescu and C. Silvestri to widen the sphere of expression of a traditional framework, achieving this through the originality of their compositional language.*

Key-words: *piano suite, Enescu and Silvestri original language*

1. Introduction

The piano suite has had a complex evolution from the Baroque to the present day. In the Romanian music of the 20th century, composers George Enescu and Constantin Silvestri had an important role in the development of this genre for piano.

George Enescu (1881 – 1955) became an emblematic composer for Romanian music, through the originality and diversity of his creation. By the way he incorporated elements of Romanian folklore into his creation, he can rightfully be called the *modern alchemist who discovered the elixir of the originality of national expression in the art of sounds, the composer who offered the Romanian solution without seeking it at any cost.*²

¹PhD Student at the Doctoral School of Music and Theatre, West University of Timișoara, ioan.mihailescu@e-uvt.ro

²Viorel Cosma – *Enescu azi* (Enescu today), Facla Publishing House, Timișoara, 1981, p.237

Of the 33 opuses that comprise the entirety of Enescu's creation, five of them are dedicated to the piano: op. 3, 5, 10, 18 and op. 24 - which includes the 3 *Piano Sonatas*, conceived at different times. Piano works have an upward direction, from miniatures to suites. The first works are characterized by varied sizes and diverse styles with a romantic touch. In opus 3, 5 and 10, the composer brings to the fore old dances and baroque and classical patterns, combining the rigor of the construction with a specific harmonic coloring. Each opus carries a title, and comprises several parts with separate titles, but also much larger and more complex in size than the miniatures of the previous period.

2. Suite Op. 10 in D major by George Enescu

The beginning of George Enescu's creation is therefore marked by diversity, in search of his own path in the realm of composition. Thus, *Suite op. 10* is an early work, from the period of his studies in Paris, where he studied both violin and composition. The music of J. S. Bach, as well as trends in French music of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, obviously influenced him at the time. Compared to *Suite no. 1* for piano *În stil vechi (In the old style)* in which he uses compositional techniques specific to the German Baroque - plus modern harmonic contributions, *The Second Suite op. 10* is rather impacted by the French baroque, processed in a vision close to that of Maurice Ravel or Claude Debussy.

Ravel's music was an original direction of updating old French music through the suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (The Grave of Couperin), which inspired Enescu directly in the *Suite op. 10*³. The music of Debussy (whom he admired with certain reservations⁴) was also an illustration of the new spirit he brought to music, which revolutionized the entire creation of the 20th century. But, as Enescu confessed to Bernard Gavoty after listening to Debussy's opera - *Pelléas and Mélisande*: "My musical thirst was not satisfied, I always ask for more."

Enescu therefore wanted another expression in music and felt the fresh source of Romanian folklore as a source of creative inspiration. In this way, the introduction of melodic and rhythmic elements taken from folklore can be felt in the piano suite, especially in their improvisational parts (for example in *Pavane* or *Bourrée*).

³Bernard Gavoty - *Amintirile lui George Enescu (Memories of George Enescu)*, Ed. Muzicală, Bucharest, 1982, p. 54: "Of course, everyone liked the refined harmonies of Ravel, but I dreamed of a more generous, more spacious music, overflowing with more onslaught, for I am an incorrigible lyricist, Wagnerian to the core.

⁴Bernard Gavoty – op. cit, p. 54

The titles of the songs from *Suite op 10* for piano are suggestive of dances or parts of a pre-classical suite: *Toccata*, *Sarabande*, *Pavane* and *Bourrée*. The sound material, however, is much more complex. The music of the pieces in this *Suite op. 10* combines in addition to baroque elements and elements of French music reflected especially in the music of Ravel and Debussy, and elements of folkloric influence from genres of Romanian popular music - *doinas* and *joc*.

As the period of making the four pieces, *Toccata* stands out as the first piece – composed in 1901, the rest of the pieces being completed in 1903. However, they are perceived by current performers as a common, unitary body, each of the pieces bringing more diversity to the suite. Which does not mean that each piece fails to have an expressive autonomy, each piece can also be interpreted separately. The *Toccata* and the *Bourrée* bring to the fore the aspect of pianistic virtuosity, the *Sarabande* and *Pavane* being represented more by harmonic refinement and that of dynamic nuance. For this suite, originally presented with the motto *Des cloches sonores*, Enescu received the *Musica Magazine* Prize from Paris and the *Pleyel* Prize in 1903.

Toccata majestically opens the suite of songs. Fast passages of triplets prelude, then processed into entertainments, and bring to the listener that aspect of instrumental virtuosity, subject of course to the bushy content of interweaving plans (some expressed in piano octaves).⁵

The unfolding in all registers of the piano, produces a wide, expressive opening to express the *Majestueusement, mais pas trop lent* character indicated by the composer at the beginning of the piece. The *f et sonore* indication also points out the impact this beginning must have on the listener. The widening of the expressive points helps to mark them, and the shades of *fff* are culminations that show the breadth thought by the composer for a piano performance, but with symphonic sonorities.

If we were to associate a fundamental element thought by the Greek philosophers among the four elements present in our physical world, the earth element would be present here. The stability of the musical discourse is given by a solid support on the bass notes, caught in resonance by the right pedal of the piano (consistently marked by the composer in the score).

Sarabande, also in the key of D major, would represent the water element due to the fluidity of its musical discourse. The group of themes, with the indication *noblément, un peu alanguï* and *doux et fondu*, as well as the *arpeggios* of the chords express the noble and generous character, but with a great depth aspect of the

⁵ Noel Malcom – George Enescu. *Viața și muzica* (Life and Music), Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2011, pp. 101-102

piece. Escapes in the acute register of the main theme, upon its return, in the final section, in B flat major, give celestial reflections to the opening theme. The original harmonies brought by Enescu in this piece give an impressionistic color to the musical discourse. A sober lyricism is expressed at the beginning of this slow, elegant dance that graced the baroque suites⁶. The *noblément* indication creates the general framework, but the piece also has shades of passion and depth, with shades of mystery, in the middle section.

The structure of the piece is tripartite, A – B – A1, the repetition of A being varied in A1 on a tonal level - right at the beginning (on *B flat* instead of *D*) and on a rhythmic level – triplets of sixteenths – as background of descending sequences that amplify in the third part of the A section (starting in bar 23). The developing section B is marked both by the change of key - B major, and by a change of tempo (MM. = 66). The frequent indication of *augmentez* and *a l'aise* indicates the fluctuating pulse of the phrases, like tumultuous waves.

Pavane, the only piece that is not in D major, which starts in the key of B minor and ends in B major, could express the *air* element, an argument being the *quasi flute* indication, noted by the composer for the sonority of the theme that appears in bar 4. The epic character or lyrical, sometimes with improvisational nuances, places this piece in a different setting than the previous pieces, exploiting precisely the expressive area of Romanian folk ballads and *doinas*. However, the structure of the piece is particularly elaborate, the improvisational parts being like an expressive binder in the general framework of the piece. The imprint of French music can be found in the area of harmonies that dress the cantabile lines. These melodic lines, however, remind us of Romanian *doinas* ("*this song, in its neoclassical guise, bears the unmistakable imprint of a Romanian doina*"⁷).

Bourrée, a piece of obvious instrumental virtuosity and the final piece of the *Suite op. 10* could be associated with the *fire* element. The symphonic combination of plans and the predominantly rhythmic structure bring to the listener's attention again an active area that tends to expand permanently, like fire. Areas of refined *burlesque* and of inspired improvisation also appear in this piece. The grandiose nature of the piece and the opening it has at the end may have led the critics to note: "*From the world Enescu suite, we exit through a grandiose portal, like a reply to the majestic entrance in the music of the Toccata*"⁸.

The journey through diverse expressive areas, but in the end united enough to express with a lot of fantasy a unitary whole, thus combines tradition with the

⁶ George Bălan – *George Enescu*, Muzicala Publishing House, Bucharest, 1962, pg. 112

⁷ Noel Malcom, op. cit. p.102

⁸ George Balan, op. cit, p. 113

modernity desired by the composer, in search of the originality of his own language within the music of the 20th century.

3. Suite III op. 6 no. 1 by Constantin Silvestri

Constantin Silvestri was highly regarded during his lifetime as a pianist, improviser pianist and conductor. His creation for the piano is very diverse, the piano playing is very attractive. The first two suites, entitled *Copii la joacă* (*Children at play*) follow a musical program; the third, however, uses another kind of programming, characterized by expressionist notes.

The third suite was composed in 1933 and contains six pieces. Each piece has a suggestive title: *Preludio*, *Duetto*, *Capriccio*, *Notturmo*, *Danze sacre* and *Baccanale*. The language used by Silvestri is visionary for the period in which it was composed, especially in the landscape of Romanian music since then.

In Silvestri's creation, the melody is defined by a combination of improvisation and a rigorous organization, determining musical themes that fall into two stylistic typologies: some with an improvisatory character, and others chosen after a strict selection. Another stylistic feature is the presence within the same piece of songs of diatonic structure with intensely chromatic melodies.

Complex and original harmony⁹ is the most personal and defining feature of Silvestri's creation. This involves a free treatment of dissonances, frequent uses of polytonal chords and frequent chromaticism. A feature of mature creations is the coloristic (neutral) support function of the harmony, above which the melody unfolds independently and next to which it forms harsh dissonances.

Preludio is the only piece that preserves a component of the preclassical suites. The musical dialogue is between two voices, resembling the two-voice inventions of J. S. Bach. The atmosphere of fear, in a whisper, is helped by the small dynamics between *mp* and *pp* and by the obsessive rendering of the thematic motif. The first note of the left hand in the *p*, like a bell heard from afar, the fermata above it gives time to the vibrations of the piano to be heard like the resonance of a bell.

The theme of the *Preludio* can be divided into two sections: the first static, in *p*, which foreshadows the thematic motif and which continues the atmosphere of silence, by continuing the use of the fermata; and the second section, dynamic, which gives the state of uncertainty through the *crescendo-diminuendos* of the theme, finally reaching the *crescendo la poco p*. There follows a transition to another

⁹ See Terenyi Ede – *Armonii moderne* (Modern Harmonies) (1900-1950), MediaMusica Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2001

appearance of the theme, this time varied, without the stops on the fermata from beginning. When the theme is in the left hand, the soprano accompaniment now acquires a special sonority. The change in tempo in the halftime measure marks the change in mood of the ending. The composer finally brings us back to the atmosphere of the first sound of the piece, with the *molto p* *express* indication. The piece ends dissonantly, undecided, in *pp* *sensibile*.

In *Duetto*, as the title suggests, we are presented with two contrasting characters. The first, with an energetic, massive nature, like a *tutti* through its full sonority, in unison, in sonorities of *mf* and *f*. For this we have the notation *senza Ped.* And the second, with the indication *cantando* and *con Ped.*, shows us its sensitive, harmonic character. If the first gave the impression of security, this one induces us insecurity through chromaticism that fluidize the melodic discourse. Another reason for the fluid feel is the tempo sequence, *accelerando/allargando*, which the composer notates with arrows, a notation that appears as a novelty in Silvestri's pieces. At the last appearance of the first character, the massive, *tutti*, sounding nature disappears; the sonority of *pp*, *molto pp* is now used – imprint of the fine nature of the second character.

The suite continues with *Capriccio*, with a modern, improvisational, burlesque character made through *arpeggiato* with *quasi pizz* notation. It does not require a massive sound, but a very energetic nature. The play proceeds almost entirely in this manner. Placing the chord on second beat of the measure destabilizes the meter. At the same time, it gives energy to the next phrase. The same chord heralds the end of the piece, but without having the destabilizing role. The ending brings unison *legato* quarter notes, a caricature of the first character of the *Duetto*, with whimsical breaks.

Notturmo brings about a very original contrast of expression, in which fleeting references are made to the music of the *Szabadban (Out of Doors)* suite by Béla Bartók or to some of the final creative works of Alexandr Scriabin. Silvestri seems to be painting a dark and internalized picture, as in *Cântecele de pustiu* op. 27.

Nocturno has an organ-like writing at the beginning of the work, through a long pedal and the melody in another register. The composer induces the nocturnal, dreamy character. It is further fueled by expressionistic harmonies in *p* that do not allow to distinguish whether it is unfolding in a dream or a nightmare. The *tempo* change at the end sets up the next section. Stopping the organ pedal changes the dense character from the beginning with a melody in the left hand like the intervention of a flute, accompanied by the march of the left hand from low to high register. The diaphanous beginning, with the impression of a beautiful dream, is brought more towards that of a nightmare by the increasingly rapid trills at the end.

The continuation of the section as in a *stretto* dynamizes sonically and amplifies through emotion each state: dream and nightmare.

Danze Sacre brings the sonority of an ancient ritual. The sonority of the beginning is massive, almost wanting to be heard up to the heavens. It has a high-level spiritual charge.

The element that stands out is the bi-tertial tune that gives it a special sonority. The ending of this theme brings the unison, *senza Ped.*, in contradiction with the previous sonority. It is repeated twice, once in *f*, the second time in *pp* with the *quasi una corda* indication. The middle section oscillates between choral writing with the indication *con Ped.*, and in unison with the indication *senza Ped.*, recalling the end of the original theme. The return of the ritual theme is prepared by amplifying the sonority. The last bars mark the ending, spiritual ecstasy being reached. The last chord, notated *pp*, can be interpreted as the end of a sacrificial ritual.

The ending releases the tension, by gradually decreasing the tempo and sonority. The last chord, in E major, lights up the sound and is like an answer to the dream/nightmare conflict: it was all a dream.

Baccanale is true rendering of the spirit of a Bacchanal. The piece begins with a virtuosic introduction full of sound effects through *f-p* differences, registers and by pauses that create suspense. The first theme of the piece appears in *pp* to then amplify until the end of the piece. The ascending and descending scales of the right hand add dimension to the soprano, while the fourths of the left hand keep the thematic discourse in check. Pedaling is also a primary tool for expanding the palette of sound effects. Chromatism and chords build up the tension. The ascending chromatic range is the charge of energy, the discharge materializing through a descent in high tenths. The rhythm and accents of the right hand, combined with the ostinato of the left hand, give the second theme a wild, tribal nature. Everything unfolds in an ample sonority. The coda is a continuous accumulation of sonority, with very precise and direct articulation. A micro-melody formed in the higher sounds of cluster chords is distinguished. It continues through increasing tempo indications that truly induce the euphoric trance of a Bacchanal. The pauses that appear in the last bars have the role of energizing the explosions that follow. The last two bars of the piece with the indication *ffff* are the true climax of the piece.

3. Conclusions

The two piano suites presented prove the partial takeover of a tradition specific to the genre and the concern of the composers G. Enescu and C. Silvestri to widen the

sphere of expression of a traditional framework, achieving this through the originality of their compositional language. The two composers opened new perspectives for genre creation in Romanian music of the 20th century.

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