

## **Analytical incursions into the first work in section I of the vocal-chamber cycle “Ponti Euxini Clepsydra, Sketches in ink wash painting” for oboe, clarinet, soprano, harp and percussion – *Omnia sunt hominum tenui pedentia* filo by Felicia DONCEANU**

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**Abstract:** *The love for playfulness, poetry and theatre marked the entire creation of the composer Felicia Donceanu, who tried, through minimal means of achievement, to extract the essence of artistic expression, which any performer or listener could enjoy. The intrinsic link between the two artistic components – the poetic text and the musical text, generated an original compositional style, placed far from the atonal and athematic avant-garde, embracing a modal-chromatic language, sometimes of a romantic nature, at other times with folkloric elements, with neoclassical features, impressionist or expressionist. The ingenuity and diversity of the expressive methods used place Felicia Donceanu in a timeless setting, devoid of a deliberate stylistic affiliation.*

Key-words: *poetic inspiration, compositional means, formal structure*

### **1. “Ponti Euxini Clepsydra, Sketches in ink wash painting” for oboe, clarinet, soprano, harp and percussion - poetic inspiration**

The themes addressed by the composer Felicia Donceanu in the branch of vocal-instrumental chamber musical genres are *man, the sacred, folklore, history, love, destiny, life, the irreversible passage of time*, parameters that always outline other directorial and compositional dimensions, deeply anchored in the expressive sphere of the lyrical and dramatic. The work "Ponti Euxini Clepsydra" was born in 1971, being published 3 years later by the Music Publishing House, in 1974.

The verses selected for this creation were taken from the ancient Greek-Latin poems signed by the poet Publius Ovidius Naso (42 BC – 17 AD), a prominent artistic

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personality of those times who gave posterity many valuable works. The poet's creations touched on different themes, focusing in particular on that of love and the evolution of society, largely inspired by the series of events in his life.

The poet's activity can be sequenced in three stages:

The first stage includes writings dedicated to the morals of the modern society of those times, morals that are captured in their very essence, Ovidiu Naso himself being part of an aristocratic family that had a fairly high financial comfort, enough to ensure the future poet a well-chosen education. According to the accounts of the literary historian Ovidiu Drâmbă, in the History of universal literature vol. I, the works made in this period by the poet have an erotic nuance, being contained in volumes such as: *Amoruri*, *Leacuri contra iubirii*, *Despre cosmetice*, etc

The second stage of Ovid's poetics includes themes inspired by Roman traditions, customs, legends and myths, most of the works from this period being included in the *Metamorfozele* volume.

The last stage of Ovid's creation, the most prolific, is directly marked by the influence of the events in the poet's life, he was exiled to the city of Tomis by the Roman emperor Augustus "for his general oppositional attitude towards the reforms initiated by the emperor and towards the spiritual what was at the basis of them"(Drâmbă, 1999, p 119). His work from this period can be found in the form of poems in verse, which were actually letters addressed from the prison where he was imprisoned to close people, in which the emotional - psychological states that he went through due to his condition at that time were described: despair, sadness, frustration, resignation, acceptance and love. Most of the letters/verses were later grouped into the *Triste si Pontice* volumes, the name of the second volume actually marking the place where the poet Ovidiu Naso was exiled, the shores of the Euxine Pontus.

Hence the inspiration for the name of the vocal work - the Ponti Euxini Clepsydra chambers by the composer Felicia Donceanu, a work that does not exactly transpose the mentioned poetic events, but rather refers to the idea of the irreversible flow of time (theme taken from the poem *Glossă* by Mihai Eminescu) and to the ephemerality of worldly things and facts, to the importance we must give to life in general from the perspective of love and to the emotional states that man goes through depending on life's trials and hardships.

The poetic themes chained in the composition Ponti Euxini Clepsydra are:

- the irreversible passage of time,
- love,
- destiny
- death.

"I chose some texts, some quotes from Ovid for the creation of the work *Ponti Euxini Clepsydra*. Still... by the way... the clepsydra, the time, the clock..." (Donceanu 1996).

Basically, the sonority of the work conveys an artistic donceanian message anchored in the beauty and expressiveness of ancient verses, being realized in a vocal-instrumental coloristic of a neoclassical character due to the instruments used - oboe, clarinet, soprano, harp and percussion. Also, the work is built in the form of a sound arc from the point of view of the psychological climax, creating in the first part "the image of the state of youth", and in the second "the human state generated by the awareness of the irreversible passage of time", specific to the twilight moments of life.

The subtitle of this work *Schițe în laviu- Sketches in ink wash painting* explains the specific modest attitude of the composer - by specifying "sketches", without the pretension of a complex, exhaustive approach to the respective texts, but also her love for the visual arts by introducing the notion of "*laviu- ink wash painting*". This is a process, a painting technique related to watercolor, which uses monochrome coloring, but also dilutes the color with sepia or a water color, obtaining spectacular effects of lights and shadows, transitions to other shades, being used since the 15th century. In this case, although she benefits from a rich musical color - timbre device, the composer suggests an economy of means, an assumed restriction of the possibilities of expression, but also a unity, at least as an origin, of the various seemingly contrasting elements.

The process of the *ink wash painting* is metamorphosed in *Ponti Euxini Clepsydra* by interweaving the *glossine* philosophical theme - the irreversible passage of time, with Ovidian poetic verse, with compositional means and techniques and with "directorial" details.

### 1.1. Scenic directions

Regarding the directorial details, Felicia Donceanu thought of this work in a dramaturgical manner, sketching a small direction aimed at the theatrical aspect of the work, bringing it closer to the genre of vocal-instrumental theatre. The unique character of the action, the soprano, must wear a white, long dress, painted with dark, monochrome dots (black or gray), to which is added a single spot of light, vivid, contrasting colour. Also, the dramaturgy of the work must be amplified in parts 5 and 6 (*Sine fronde, sine arbore campos...* and *Et gemitus vox est magna mei!*) by the vocal-theatrical interpretation of the soprano, who will kneel, tap her heel and outline begging gestures by raising her arm, performed in a swing of the body. Likewise, the end of the entire cycle must be performed in the same theatrical note, the performance of the final vocalization of the soprano being played behind a screen or other decorative element.

## 1.2. The sections of the chamber vocal-instrumental work “Ponti Euxini Clepsydra - Sketches in ink wash painting” for oboe, clarinet, soprano, harp and percussion

With regard to the structure of the work, it is conceived in two large sections that were born under the influence of the eminence glosian poetic meaning and the Ovidian metaphorical verse, meanings that cross a crescendo and a decrescendo of the psychological intensity of the musical discourse.

### I. *Ternorum Lusor Amorum* (The singer of tender loves)

1. *Omnia sunt hominum tenui pedentia filo...* (All that is human hangs by a thread ...)
2. *Juventus, juvenus! Rem caram tempora nostra!* (Youth, youth! Precious thing, our time!)
3. *Oculite si amavit, amet...* (He who has ever loved, let him love in secret ...)
4. *Nunc fecundus ager!* (Now the land is fertile!)

### II. *Fortuna Volubilis Errat...* (The changing fate is wandering ...)

5. *Sine fronde, sine arbore campos...* (Leafless, treeless fields ...)
6. *Et gemitus vox est magna mei!* (And my cry of sorrow is great!)
7. *At tibi, qui transis, ne sit grave, quisquis amasti...* (But you, passer-by, don't have a hard time if you loved ...).

Under the impulse of intuition to intertwine the two poetic meanings of a philosophical nature, the composer creates her own sound system with philosophical and metaphorical connotations, in a work that releases substrates of deep introspective meditation.

The theme of the work penciled in this way captures the idea of the irreversible passage of time.

## 2. Compositional methods and means - Section I. “Ternorum Lusor Amorum” (Singer of tender loves)

The approach is done minimally at the level of the sung text, the procedures used to be segmentation, complete or partial repetitions, but also the elliptical solution. For example, the first movement has the literary suggestion in the title, but the soprano only emits vowels, missing the text, only the last gesture proposes, optionally - thanks to the bracket - the closing of the mouth: “(a-m)”. These approaches to the text, also present in other works by Felicia Donceanu but also in other modern creations, depart from the typical construction of a lied or a cycle of such pieces,

here the notion is used with the meaning of vocal genre (with accompaniment), miniature, chamber.

### **2.1. The timbrality used in Section I. "Ternorum Lusor Amorum" (Singer of tender loves)**

The chamber formation is atypical, (compared to the normality of the chamber vocal genre, but in the 20th century, especially in the second half, such heterogeneous formations, more or less complex, that include the human voice, appear more and more often many of the Romanian composers having such achievements, very diverse stylistically and timbral) composed of two wind instruments - oboe and clarinet (in *la*, in sheet music), harp, percussion and soprano voice, shows from the beginning a more special intention of the author.

Moreover, optionally, the end of the third piece proposes the oboist to switch to block flute, further diversifying the timbral area. The percussion is proposed to certain members of the band (the soprano, respectively the clarinetist, there is a set of clarifying information in this regard in the beginning of the score, so it is intended for non-professionals), which thus remain four, not being complicated, intervening in the beginning and during the second piece, in the fourth and fifth play.

The formation includes several types of sound emission - the vibrations of the strings (plucked, in the case of the harp), the column of air - in the wind and human, hitting or shaking some idiophonic percussion instruments - Lancetta, Maracas, Tom-tom bass, 3 Wood, Chop. All percussion instruments are non-tunable, being used in certain pieces to enrich timbral, but also as a significant gesture, the dramaturgy of the piece.

The choice of wind instruments is not a typical one, due to the presence of the oboe. It has a very meaningful timbre, risking to grab attention and undermine the plans of the other actors of the speech, but the careful choice of registers used and the type of writing shows a very good knowledge of the particularities of this instrument, so that it integrates perfectly into the whole.

The clarinet chosen is one in *la*, less often used (proving again the finesse of the choice), the motivation being the special warmth, the even greater proximity to the human vocal timbre of it, in addition allowing the lowering of the lower limit of the ambitus by another semitone, the clarinet replacing at certain moments the bass role of the harp.

In this ensemble, the harp primarily has a harmonic role, but also a rhythmic one, on certain occasions assuming certain spectacular figurations or glissandos with the role of dramatic emphasis, in rarer situations even having a melodic role.

For diversity of approach, certain pieces do not use the full line-up, the third piece missing the harp, while the fifth lacks the clarinet.

### **3. "Omnia sunt hominum tenui pedentia filo..." (All that is human hangs by a thread...) - compositional analysis**

The first piece of the chamber vocal-instrumental cycle - "Omnia sunt hominum tenui pedentia filo..." (All that is human hangs by a thread...) has an introductory, slow preparatory role (the indicated tempo is the fourth = 40) of the following movements, starting from a minimal solution, based on a generative cell of a rhythmic nature, towards a gradual amplification that reaches a climax, then withdraws into an obviously open, non-definitive conclusion (respecting the punctuation of the title).

The construction involves five segments (in size corresponding to larger phrases) which are interpenetrated, joint, by overlapping the end of one with the beginning of the next. The delimitations can be made primarily due to the sound material, but also the fine modification of the writing (oscillating between homophony and polyphony, with interpretably heterophonic moments), but not least due to the changes of a dramatic nature, of significance, in the musical text (the literary text missing, it cannot help with formal structuring).

Thus, the first phrase, A, centered on do# (or reb, due to the complexity of the harp writing), has an introductory, preparatory aspect, in which the flexible chromatic modal structure is "born" with moving steps, without totalizing the dodecaphonic (the structure of the mode of the first phrase is outlined as follows: do# - re - mi - fa - sol/sol# - la/la# - si, chromatic mode with an asymmetrical structure, involving a possible semitone-tone-semitone tetrachord at the base and a lidic one /tritonic or chromatic at the peak) from an apparent ostinato of the harp and a gesture of the clarinet, commented by the oboe and then the voice. The harp exhibits a repeated do#, through timbral differentiation (uses harmonic sounds), dubbing and register, with which the first motive is built (the first two measures and the beginning of the third), over which the clarinet appears, proposing a cell anacrusis from two adjacent sounds, the first very short, the second much longer. The ascending stringing of this loosely sequenced cell builds a second motif (measures 3-5), followed by a third (measures 5-8), in which the oboe and voice take over the generating cell and imitate the clarinet.

The image displays a musical score for the first phrase (measures 1-8) of a vocal-chamber cycle. The score is arranged in four systems. The first system includes staves for Oboe, Clarinetto in La, Soprano, and Arpa. The second system continues the vocal and piano parts. The third system continues the vocal and piano parts. The fourth system continues the vocal and piano parts. The music is in 3/4 time and features a modal, tense, and depressed atmosphere. Dynamics include pp and mp.

Fig. 1. First phrase – A (measures 1 – 8)

The harmony is specifically modal, tense and depressed, the resulting chord being a minor one with a minor seventh and minor ninth (do#-mi-sol#-si-re). The attitude is one of tense anticipation, with a slight nuance.

The second phrase, B, between measures 8-13, constitutes a development and transition area of the modal center, which begins on the initial do# and descends to si, to resolve a perfect fifth below, on an mi.

The image displays a musical score for a piece, specifically the second phrase, B, spanning measures 8 to 13. The score is arranged in four staves: two vocal staves (Soprano and Alto) and two piano staves (Right and Left Hand). The music is written in 4/4 time. The vocal lines are characterized by long, flowing phrases with numerous slurs and ties, indicating a continuous melodic line. The piano accompaniment consists of chords and moving lines in both hands, providing harmonic support for the vocal parts. The score is presented in a clear, legible format, suitable for a music manuscript or a printed score.

Fig. 2. Second phrase, B (between measures 8 – 13)



The development is visible in the writing of each instrument, the harp becomes asymmetric and much richer rhythmically, conquering a si in the bass, the imitative gesture of the oboe becomes a chromatic pentachord melody, the gestures of the voice thicken and gain new sounds (from two to three - mi - sol# - la#), the clarinet explores the mid-low register with a quick, ornamental, rich gesture. The four entities work in a polyphonic type structure, having a pedal (evolving from do# to si-do#) on the harp, gradually crowding out the melodic gestures. Two motifs can be distinguished, one larger and in clear crescendo (measure 8 for the oboe/9 for the other voices - measure 11), the other more restricted and static (measures 12-13).

The third phrase, C (measures 13-18), begins together with the end of the previous one, at the moment of the installation of the mi major chord on the harp (in effect, its writing using enharmonies), observing three motifs: the first to the end of measure 14, the second from measure 15 with anacruza at the end of measure 16, the third (conjoined previously with the precedent) from the end of measure 16, on the clarinet to the beginning of measure 18, delimiting complex melodic gestures of the oboe, then of the oboe and voice, in the third leading the clarinet.

The image displays a musical score for measures 13 through 18. The score is arranged in a system of seven staves. The top two staves are for the vocal line, with lyrics 'mi sol# la#' written below the notes. The middle two staves are for the harp, with a bass clef on the left and a treble clef on the right. The bottom three staves are for the instrumental ensemble, including oboe, clarinet, and another instrument. The score features various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like *mp* and *ben legato, molto espressivo*. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4.

Fig. 3. *The third phrase, C (measures 13-18), met by the last motive of the second phrase, measure 12*

On a microstructural level, the initial anacrusic cell (from the clarinet debut, measure 3) continues to constitute the discourse-generating element, but in the context of a more complex and generous harmony, with certain tonal nuances - the first motive ends on a major mi with a major sixth added (mi-sol#-si-do#), the second on a major mi with augmented fourth added (mi-sol#-la#-si), the third sliding on a new harmony, which will form the basis harmonic of the fourth phrase, a major reb.

A new clustering of gestures at the end of this phrase, as well as the insistence on the near-consonant harmony of the harp (corresponding to the gestural endings of the winds and voice), together with the dynamic indications, establish a climax achieved at the very moment of conjunction with the fourth phrase.

This is also accentuated by the proposed dynamic break at the beginning of the fourth phrase, subito pianissimo.

The return to the do#/reb centre in this fourth phrase, along with the voice's return to the lab-sol bicord, on the unexpected unification of the oboe and clarinet, playing a single melody, in double octaves (perfect fifteenths), make formal interpretation difficult of it. The first visualization of the writing - denser, but also with elements of heterophony - leads to the idea of a D (of a fourth different structure), but the returning to the initial center leads us to the idea of a varied A (between measures 18-21).

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of four staves: three vocal staves and one piano accompaniment staff. The vocal staves show melodic lines with various dynamics such as *pp*, *f*, *mp*, and *sf*. The piano accompaniment features chords and arpeggiated figures, with a section marked 'ord.' and 'f sottovoce'. The second system also has four staves, continuing the vocal and piano parts. Dynamics here include *poco cresc.*, *mp*, *sub p*, and *ppp*. The piano part continues with harmonic support for the vocal lines.

Fig. 4. A *var* (between measures 18 – 21), met by measures 16 – 17

Harmonically, reb major benefits from two added notes (sol and si b), resulting in the harmonic structure reb-f-sol-lab-sib, a mixed pentatonic structure, with *pieni* in the melodic progression. Three gestures can be observed, at the level of the motif, the first two common among the three melodic instruments, the third bringing the voice to the fore, finishing together at the end of measure 21.

The last phrase, a conclusion/coda (measures 22-25), notated in the D (Coda) scheme, brings a new center, which proves final - sib, an unexpected solution, specifically modal, in accordance with the popular Romanian tradition in which the music of major type often ends surprisingly with a minor third lower - here from reb/do# (major) in sib. This last phrase is restrained, relying only on a static harmony (ending on the sib-do-re harmonic structure) and a voice gesture, gradually ascending, using the same generator cell, but rhythmically "tamed" (the difference

of duration between the short and the long - ratio 1:2, compared to the previous 1:7), recalling the initial gesture of the clarinet.

Overall, the form is free, evolving, but with an articulation given by the varied resumption of the initial structure, resulting in the scheme A B C Av D. If structure B is considered a transition and D a coda, the structure can be considered that of a form of tripartite lied, with A transition B (formerly C) Av Coda (formerly D) scheme.

#### 4. Conclusions

The compositional style of the work *Omnia sunt hominum tenui pedentia filo...* (Everything that is human hangs by a thread...), but also the dramaturgical vision of the vocal-instrumental chamber cycle "Ponti Euxini Clepsydra, Sketches in ink wash painting" for oboe, clarinet, soprano, harp and percussion, places Felicia Donceanu in the sphere of timeless composers, guided by the freedom of fantasy and the inner psychological portrait, "proving to be a spirit whose artistic manifestations aim at a border art between sound, colour, gesture and poetry, a melange that gives added complexity and vastness to the proposed incursion" (Ardeleanu, 2014).

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