

***RENAȘTEREA - Epoca de aur a polifoniei corale.
Considerații de stilistică dirijorală
/ The RENAISSANCE – The Golden Age of Choral
Polyphony. Considerations regarding Conducting
Stylistics – Ioan Oarcea – 2022***

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The book *The Renaissance – The Golden Age of Choral Polyphony. Considerations regarding Conducting Stylistics* by Ioan Oarcea, published by StudIS Publishing House from Cluj-Napoca in 2022, is a compendium, based on synthetic expositions presented under the form of worksheets, which contain information about Renaissance composers belonging to the most important musical centres that represent specific geographical and cultural regions: Flemish, French, Italian, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and German.

Throughout the history of music, the means of organizing sound material and the process of musical expression and performance underwent gradual development, while in the present one may witness rapid transformations. For example, Medieval polyphony was developed throughout a period of five centuries, while in the Renaissance, the “sublime” style of polyphony dominated the musical sphere for more than a century. The musical language of the Classical period survived approximately eight decades, that of the Romantic era for less than a century, while the musical culture of the 20th century witnessed the rapid succession of various stylistic orientations.

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The basic principles of music education largely stem from the premises of the pedagogical conceptions promoted in the past century. We believe that for the acquirement of a unified and organic understanding of the contemporary musical phenomenon, a historical correlation with previous eras must be established, because the vigor and brilliance of our musical culture must be based on its ability to assimilate the values of the past.

In this context, the book of PhD. Ioan Oarcea, dedicated to the choral compositions from the golden era of vocal polyphony, as the Renaissance era is also referred to, is a substantial work of theoretical synthesis and performance practice, destined for the preparation and delivery of Choral Conducting and Choral Ensemble courses within the Faculties of Music, disciplines that provide theoretical foundation of musical knowledge for students.

As the author himself confesses in the Introduction, the work does not aim to exhaust the analytical observations of musicological and stylistic nature regarding the composers and their works, focusing instead on offering a base of information necessary for a complex and complete analytic approach, through thorough bibliographic documentation and by relying on the specific contents of each domain of musicological subjects.

The information is presented concisely, which makes it easy to read and assimilate for the readers, resembling worksheets that contain brief information about the composers and their works, as well as important stylistic considerations characteristic for each of these composers.

PhD. Ioan Oarcea is the graduate of two prestigious musical institutions: the Faculty of Music from Timișoara, and the “Ciprian Porumbescu” Conservatoire from Bucharest. Conductor of the ASTRA Chamber Choir since 1986, founding member and president of the “Romanian Association for Choral Singing” (1996), member of the boards of the Choral Federation „A Coeur Joie – International” (1996 – France) and the “Cultural Forum of the Balkans” (1996 – Greece), and musical advisor of the European Choral Federation “Europa Cantat” (2016), PhD. Ioan Oarcea is a conductor with a calling and extensive performance experience, predominantly in the realm of choral works. In the year 2007 he obtained the title of PhD in Music. Professor Oarcea is a dedicated teacher, with rich pedagogical experience, cherished by his students, who serves the musical art with dedication, sensitivity and professionalism.

Structured in several substantial chapters, the present volume provides an exceptional overview of the choral works from the 3rd century up to the

Renaissance period, with a focus on the latter, presented succinctly and through a vision that integrates the distinctive features of representative composers, the methods of constructing structural and rhetorical syntaxes, and proposals for artistic performance styles. Thus, the work *The Renaissance – The Golden Age of Choral Polyphony (RENAȘTEREA - Epoca de aur a polifoniei)* facilitates the knowledge and thorough understanding of one of the most brilliant eras, that of the vocal polyphony of the Renaissance, between the 14th and 16th centuries (Comes 1984, 60).

The first chapter, bearing the title *Constitutive Stylistic Elements of the Musical Language (Elemente stilistice constitutive ale limbajului musical)* presents the main concepts that lie at the core of musical composition and permits the analytical understanding of the elements that make up the language of musical communication: melody, rhythm, dynamics, agogic, tempo, timbre, harmony, polyphony, formal architecture.

The following chapter, *Historical and Musical Landmarks between the 3rd and 14th centuries (Repere istorice și muzicale în secolele III – XIV)*, offers a diachronic view on the beginnings of music composition and performance, emphasized by the image of the various schools and representatives who laid the foundations of music theory and musical performance. The author emphasizes the main features of the period between the 9th and 11th centuries, the era of post-Gregorian and secular monody, with a focus on the particularities of Gregorian chant. This is followed by the presentation of the two schools of composition, the *Ars Antiqua* schools from the 12th and 13th centuries and *Ars Nova* from the 14th century, through representative composers of this era of primary polyphony.

The chapter *The Renaissance. The Dawn of the Modern History of Arts (Renașterea. Începutul istoriei moderne a artelor)* is the most consistent, opening with a theoretical foundation supported from a historical, religious, cultural, socio-economic, and political point of view, emphasizing the essential feature that marked the entire culture of the Renaissance – Humanism.

The Renaissance was an era of great cultural and artistic change in Europe, that manifested in the musical realm only towards the end of the epoch, due to the long period of evolution underwent by the musical language, from the medieval monody to the thorough crystallization of polyphony. In this period, music became more sophisticated, balanced, and harmonious, reflecting the humanist ideals of the Renaissance, while choral music underwent a

remarkable evolution. The style of the vocal music of the Renaissance, as the author himself remarks, has a unified character as a whole, but presents differences both on a national and personal level through: the manner in which rhythmic-melodic structures are built, the intertwining of polyphonic lines, the use and treatment of dissonances, the architectural construction of form and cadences, as well as the expressiveness of the emotional content of the message (p. 75). In order to demonstrate that the stylistic particularities common for the majority of Renaissance composers are reflected in the identity of the elements of language, the author, in the succinct manner with which we have grown accustomed by now, presents the main features of melody within the musical language of the Renaissance, followed by the presentation of the stages of rhythmic development and the particularities of metrics from the perspective of conducting stylistics. Polyphony, harmony, tempo, dynamics, or timbre are important elements that support the expressiveness of the message hidden beyond the text and the mastery of the polyphonic technique, that in the 16th century was merged with the homophonic thinking, paving the way for the transition towards the Baroque era.

The perfection of the Renaissance polyphonic art occurred through the confluence of several elements, belonging to three important areas of Western Europe. One of the first elements belongs to the British region, which contributed to the finalization of the harmonic structure through the use of imperfect consonances of the thirds and sixths, which became foundational points for polyphony, either through alternation with perfect consonances, or by combining with them in the sound of perfect chords. The second element belongs to the Franco-Flemish school and consists of an exceptional development of the imitative technique, while the third element is characterized by the cantability and brilliance of melody, and it belongs to the southern region of Italy.

The musical landmarks characterized by innovations, as well as technical and expressive achievements are presented succinctly, first by highlighting the stylistic characteristics of the elements of musical language and then through their applicability to the musical centers or representative schools: Flemish (Dutch), French, Italian, English, Spanish, Portuguese, and German. The difficulty in understanding the complex message of a choral composition from the Renaissance era lies in the fact that the score (often) lacks indications regarding the agogic unfolding of the temporal fabric, as well as the nuances of

dynamic intensity, through which the spatial sound, the ideational content, and its expressive-emotional character are shaped and defined. This is why this book is important: the complexity and expressiveness of the performance of choral works requires the conductor to have detailed knowledge and understanding, intensive comparative study, and, above all, interpretive stylistic intuition. As a practical manifestation of musical art, conducting stylistics involves the interpretive recreation of a musical work, in harmony with the conductor's personal vision and the composer's intentions. The educational utility of this book is evident in each chapter, supported by the author's assertion that the study of Renaissance choral works in choral conducting classes is essential and mandatory, because by studying during rehearsals and performing in concerts, students can visually follow the conductor's facial expressions and gestures in leading the polyphonic voices, as well as the full range of elements and techniques that contribute to shaping a conductor's professional profile.

Finally, it is important to mention the impressive number of scores consulted and studied that belong to the author's personal musical database (more than 2.200 scores), a fact which proves his constant preoccupation regarding the valorization and promotion of a vast repertoire from the works of lesser-known composers of the Renaissance period, one of the most influential periods in history, with an inexhaustible thematic extension revealed through the interpretive approach to the works of each composer (Oarcea 2010).

By reading this work, rich in specialized information and well-structured, one may discover the figure of the conductor that serves the art of music, thus fulfilling his personal conception regarding performance, completed by important analytical observations of musicological and stylistic nature. In essence, the book *The Renaissance – The Golden Age of Choral Polyphony (RENAȘTEREA - Epoca de aur a polifoniei corale Considerații de stilistică dirijorală)*, supported by a substantial bibliography, may be a valuable tool, a thoroughly documented material, useful and necessary for all those who love choral music, for music teaches who can become conductors of school ensembles or amateur choirs, with the mission of awakening in their students the passion for choral singing.

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