

Music in motion. The compositional vision of *Dumitru Capoianu* in the music of the film “*If I were Harap Alb*”

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Abstract: *In this work, I continue my research approach to Romanian film music, focusing on Dumitru Capoianu's music in the film “If I were Harap Alb”. The composer's approach to the soundtrack introduces the audience right from the credits into a world of the fantastic, emphasizing also the time and space details of the action through the melodic evocation of Romanian folklore. Also, the music accompanies the main character, metamorphosing according to the events in which he takes part in his growing process. The compositional aspects are thus analyzed according to their close connection with the script, Capoianu's score being one of great value for Romanian film music.*

Key-words: *Dumitru Capoianu, Romanian film music, “If I were Harap Alb”, film music score.*

1. Introduction

The film *If I Were Harap Alb* is part of the Gopo-Capoianu portfolio, a director-composer team that collaborated on several productions, all of which achieved success. Premiering in 1965, the film garnered two major awards: the Special Jury Prize and the Award for Scenography at the Mamaia Film Festival, as well as the UNIATEC Award for originality in color imagery at the Milan Festival. The production was well-received by critics at the time. For instance, D.I. Suchianu remarked in a review that the film exhibits “a daring and successful boldness on Gopo’s part, through his use of a very rare and subtle form of comedy,” which he referred to as “humorous enormity” (Suchianu 1965, 2-3). The film critic also noted that “Gopo employs humorous anachronism,” which “has a delightful charm” (Suchianu 1965, 2-3).

The director-screenwriter’s approach to the fairy tale is itself novel. Rather than simply retelling the “Harap Alb” tale, he has a young prince imagine himself as “Harap Alb”, engaging in a fairy tale adventure filled with the events of the literary

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story. However, the protagonist embarks on this journey with a sense of duality; on one hand, his actions and behaviour in the opening scenes reveal his naivety and cowardice, while on the other, he holds a position above ordinary mortals, aware of his future and the challenges he must face. Although he sets out on a journey to embrace his destiny, his human side—with its characteristic weaknesses—remains, as he often voices his grievances about the inconveniences he encounters while carrying out the tasks dictated by the story. The very title, with the phrase *If I Were*, suggests the protagonist's struggle to fulfill his destiny. In this way, the film can be seen as a parody of the idea of heroism and the existential model offered by fairy tales, with the director-screenwriter employing the technique of a story within a story, allowing for identification with the hero of the literary work.

2. General aspects

The music for the film was composed by *Dumitru Capoianu*, although two additional composers, *Henry Mălineanu* and *Nicolae Kirculescu*, are credited in the film's titles. These two composers wrote the vocal pieces performed by Ion Alexe and Andreea Constantinescu. However, this study will focus on the music composed by *Dumitru Capoianu* for the film. A persistent issue in analyzing Romanian film music of the 20th century is the absence of original scores, as the locations of many scores by Romanian composers remain unknown. For the film "*If I Were Harap Alb*", this study relies on the surviving instrumental parts available in the National Film Archive, where there are 912 pages of instrumental parts for violin, viola, cello, double bass, piccolo, flute, oboe, clarinet, trumpet, horn in F, tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, xylophone, vibraphone, harp and piano. Although the full score's location is unknown, we can still derive valuable insights from these parts, despite the fact that they may not include all of the film's musical moments.

Certain details, however, cannot be inferred solely from the parts. For example, there have been instances where the composer, or the composer along with the director, decided to reassign a piece of music originally composed for one scene to another, a change sometimes noted in the full score or simply marked with an "X" by the composer. Additionally, the full score may contain the composer's instructions on important elements, such as adjustments to instrumental sounds for a recurring melodic theme, the number of repetitions required for a particular theme, and so on. For example, in the case of the film *Alarm in the Danube Delta*, where the full score is preserved, all these details are visible, as is the composer's working style, which prominently features color markers for notes and to indicate

the number of repetitions different instruments should play, according to the scene. In this way, the composer illustrates the timbral evolution of a musical idea.

In contrast, the parts, which were prepared by a copyist, do not show these details, and any modifications made during recording or editing can only be identified by watching the film and comparing the final product with the parts. Another important finding from analysing the parts from "*If I Were Harap Alb*" is that not all of the film's musical moments have been preserved; certain musical passages that might have appeared in the full score are missing. We cannot know for certain what happened to the missing sections of the score. Nevertheless, given the challenge of locating the original Romanian film music scores and the uncertainty of recovering this lost treasure, consulting the existing parts still offers a significant opportunity for researchers to analyze the compositional features of the film's soundtrack. It is also important to note that the musical examples provided in this study will include images of the original parts, as I believe it is essential to view the notational style used for film music scores at the time, providing a more intimate understanding of the composer, especially considering that musicology has so far paid little attention to this field.

For the creation of the soundtrack for this film, *Dumitru Capoianu* worked with a small symphonic orchestra. We deduce that the orchestra was modest in size based on the overall nature of the soundtrack, which does not rely on extended musical passages but rather focuses on the creation of character themes. The orchestration that provides harmonic support highlights these themes, which are timbrally transformed depending on the context. These melodic themes are memorable, easily recognizable, and carry symbolic meaning. *Capoianu's* adaptability to various cinematic genres, demonstrated throughout his career, is evident in this production as well. He successfully tailored his music to the script, employing sound structures that evoke emotions in both the audience and the characters, as well as music with an illustrative character.

The primary considerations in analysing *Capoianu's* music in this study will be the relationship between sound and image, and the symbiosis between these two elements. While the musical language elements used by the composer are also important, they contribute to a larger, overarching picture—that of the film's universe, where the narrative thread has influenced the choice of certain musical language elements or the placement of specific melodic themes within scenes. Musicologist Viorel Cosma shared this view, noting that *Capoianu's* music often "surpasses the power of words, with his soundtracks (for films like *Steps Toward the Moon*, *A Short History*, *Homo Sapiens*, *A Bomb Was Stolen*) becoming characters in themselves, commenting on the action". This may be the "secret" behind *Capoianu's* prominence in Romanian film music, which led director *Ion Popescu-Gopo* to assert:

“He is undoubtedly the best film composer, versatile, fresh—modern and classic—well-versed in cinematic technique, skilfully mastering the soundtrack by merging it with the image, always prioritizing content over form” (Cosma 2012, 11).

3. Prologue

Music is a form of cultural expression found in every region of the world and throughout all periods of human history. It carries geographic, cultural, chronological, and even social connotations, which can enhance a film’s expressiveness by suggesting its genre and setting in time and space (Larsen 2005, 210). In the case of “*If I Were Harap Alb*”, the audience already has a theoretical understanding of how events will unfold. This familiarity stems from the fact that the film is an adaptation of the literary fairy tale *The Story of Harap Alb*, which was widely known in Romania at the time among both children and adults. Thus, this film diverges from the usual approach for introductory music or opening scenes in a production, where music typically sets the narrative tone or hints at the outcome. We will explore this divergence further in the text.

The film opens with scenes of the Crai’s court shrouded in mist, accompanied by background sounds of animals and a brief blend of woodwind sounds, primarily featuring a short folkloric motif that emulates the sound of a flute. This musical choice sonically immerses the audience in the pastoral atmosphere of the Romanian fairy tale. Simultaneously, it situates the audience within the story’s temporal and spatial setting, with the mist symbolizing the element of surprise that Gopo will incorporate in his interpretation of the tale, adapting the literary work through his unique vision. Furthermore, the appearance of the Crai’s three sons before the mist lifts subtly reflects the real status of each son’s potential and accomplishments. Of the three sons, the eldest and middle sons were deemed by their father as the most suitable candidates to inherit the throne of his brother’s kingdom—a view supported by the qualities they displayed in the King’s court. However, this mist also hints at the uncertainty surrounding the heroic abilities of these two sons, who nonetheless had their father’s trust. This uncertainty dissipates when the mist clears, and the brass instruments begin to play, accompanying the archery demonstration. The brass sounds create and sustain an atmosphere of grandeur in the Crai’s court, underscoring the Crai’s superiority as ruler, as well as the courage and heroism of his sons, of whom he was proud.

Capoianu preserves a continuity cycle in his film compositions dedicated to heroism and the world of childhood. In the opening credits of *If I Were Harap Alb*, he introduces a melodic motif that can also be heard in some of his other works,

establishing it as a compositional hallmark. This “heroic motif,” as I have labeled it in my previous studies, can also be identified in *“The Adventures of Babușcă”* and *“Alarm in the Danube Delta”*. This motif is built around a generative cell based on an ascending and descending minor third interval, which the composer explores in other secondary melodic ideas as well. The fact that he retains this heroic context for the motif across films suggests that *Capoianu* intended to create a distinctive signature around this musical cell, one that transcends individual storylines and signifies a universal virtue of heroism.

The presence of a generative cell for musical character motifs and themes—“character” in the sense that these themes embody a universal virtue associated with particular types of situations, making them symbolic “audio characters”—is not surprising in *Capoianu’s* work. He has demonstrated this ability to develop musical cells in other contexts, most notably in his score for *“Gopo’s Little Man”*, where he created an entire memorable score using only three notes: C, B, and B-flat. “A composer gifted with a surprising and abundant creative imagination (he does not repeat himself from one work to another, even within the cohesive thematic cycles of *Ion Popescu-Gopo’s* films), exploring nearly all genres and forms of contemporary music, D.C. stands out among the boldest, most spontaneous, and original Romanian creators” (Cosma 2012, 11). *Capoianu* also brings a cyclical character to his soundtracks by reprising the heroic motif both in the opening and closing of the film, a technique he has used in other works, such as *“Alarm in the Danube Delta”* and *“The Adventures of Babușcă”*.

4. Character melodic themes

The score composed for *“If I Were Harap Alb”* is complex, with the composer employing several established techniques in film music, such as musical illustration, mickey-mousing, foreshadowing danger, emphasizing suspense, diegetic music, and leitmotifs that evolve into character themes. *Capoianu’s* score also reveals a preference for fast chromatic passages, exceptional rhythmic divisions, rhythmic augmentation, ostinato heterophony on the same melodic theme, the alternation of binary and ternary rhythms, and, most importantly, the use of a foundational melodic cell that generates material and melodic ideas for the entire soundtrack. In this study, we will focus primarily on identifying the character melodic themes assigned to the following characters: “Spânul”; “Gerilă”, “Setilă”, and “Flămânzilă”; Craiul and his two elder sons and the Fairy. Notably absent from this list is the main character, to whom the composer does not assign a specific melodic theme; instead,

he is accompanied sonically by the melodic themes of the characters who accompany him on his journey toward maturity.

Music aids in the characterization of a story's protagonists. By attaching a specific motif to a particular character, music not only helps identify the character through musical cues but also evokes certain emotions toward that character. In the opening scenes of *"If I Were Harap Alb"*, we can identify two musical structures, presented sequentially, which are also introduced visually in line with the symbolism they convey, thus ascribing heroic qualities to the Crai's two eldest sons.

The first structure consists of two melodic motifs functioning as a call-and-response. The trumpet introduces the first melodic motif, where we see the composer's preference for compound meter and for the third interval, which forms the basis of the melodic construction. Additionally, the augmentation of note values contributes to the grandeur of the Crai's court. A descending melodic passage from the horn in F links this motif with its repetition. This first musical idea concludes with timpani beats, reinforcing an atmosphere of grandeur but also hinting at suspense and a hint of fear that will later enter the narrative. Although these two melodic structures are connected in the film, they are titled differently in the score - *Illumination of Color* and *Archery Announcements* - indicating that they belong to distinct musical tableaux, which were likely sequenced together during the editing process.

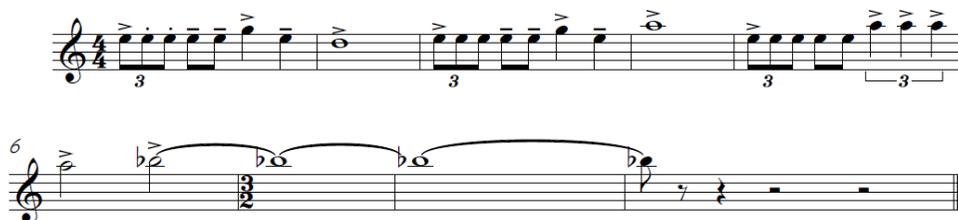


Fig. 1. *Trumpet in C, Motif 1, melodic structure 1 from the beginning of the film - archery scene (Capoianu manuscript, 118)*

The second musical structure in the opening tableau at the Crai's court is presented only once and is synchronized with the image of the Crai's eldest son. The choice by the director and composer to feature this musical structure a single time carries symbolic connotations, emphasizing the firstborn's rightful status as heir to his father's throne, or that of Emperor Green. This musical cue also hints at the positive, heroic image the eldest son holds within his father's court, as the firstborn and thus the one with the greatest potential among the three brothers. This implication is visually reinforced by the scene where the eldest son successfully hits the center of

the apple target with his arrow, symbolizing his presumed heroic virtues through this accomplishment.

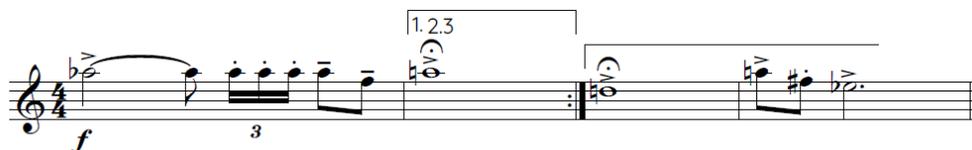


Fig. 2. *Trumpet in C – Motif 2 attributed to the eldest of Crai’s son (Capoianu manuscript, 118)*

Once again, we notice the composer’s preference for the third interval, which forms the basis of the melodic idea. He further conveys the grandeur of the Crai’s court through note-value augmentation and a dynamic swell to forte in the brass interpretation, enhancing the regal atmosphere of the scene. From the very first scenes accompanied by the soundtrack, we can recognize another of *Capoianu*’s compositional trademarks: his use of chromatic passages to emphasize characters’ gestures or to open or close a particular scene. At the beginning of the film, *Capoianu* uses the entire symphony orchestra, highlighting the brass section, while also giving important roles to other instruments; the violin, in particular, sustains the frenzy and the agitation sparked by the courtly atmosphere.



Fig. 3. *Violin 1. Illumination of color. Predilection for chromatic passages expressed from the beginning of the film (Capoianu manuscript, 118)*

An emotionally scene that further immerses the audience in a world of fantasy and reverie is the one in which the babysitter tells the young children the story of Harap Alb. Through her tale, she introduces them to a world dominated with the violence typical of fairy tales, which contrasts with the imagination of the youngest son, who, feeling inadequate after his failed archery attempt, yearns for an escape from his current circumstances. He identifies with the role of Harap Alb, marked by the phrase “I know,” a reflection of the babysitter’s storytelling that prepares him for the challenges he believes await him. However, he fails to realize that knowing is not the same as doing, and the challenges he encounters in the story confront him with complex and difficult situations. Through the babysitter’s story, he can assume the

role of a hero, making this scene pivotal to the film's narrative line. Although the woman describes a violent world, the music provides a sense of safety for both the listening children, the Crai's son and the audience. The composer's choice to use an ostinato melodic theme on the flute creates a feeling of security and familiarity for the audience, who already knew the story from the literary fairy tale. The warm timbre of the flute harmonizes with the woman's calming voice, instilling confidence in the young boy, who wishes to embrace the role of "Harap Alb". Brass interjections, foreshadowing danger, are also woven into the music, signaling the territory of Spânul, as described in the nurse's tale.

As illustrated by Annabel J. Cohen (Cohen 2010, 880), the perceptual process in the brain extracts the emotional significance of music, using it to enhance the narrative understanding of a film. Given the emotional potential of cinema, a film's soundtrack can be a key element in directing the audience's emotional response. The associative emotional palette in music is vast, and as an emotional agent, music is versatile, capable of conveying suspense, sadness, joy, or anger. In this case, *Capoianu's* music, though nondiegetic, evokes emotion in both the film's characters and the audience, reinforcing the fairy-tale world the film portrays.

Another important character assigned a melodic theme is the Fairy. In the score, we identify three segments dedicated to this character, marked with Roman numerals and titled *Fairy Appearance I, II, III*, along with an extended segment called *The Fairy*, where the composer explores timbral colors. The main melodic theme is passed from one instrument to another, with the violin and flute being heard most often. Once again, in the construction of the Fairy's melodic theme, we can observe the generative cell based on the minor third. In the trumpet version, there is also an ascending octave leap, a hallmark of the heroic motif that has become universal in *Capoianu's* films.

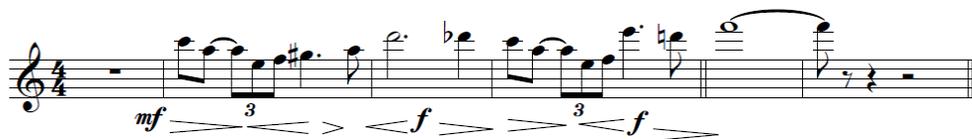


Fig. 4. *Piccolo – Fairy Melodic Theme, in the score called „Fairy Apparition” (Capoianu manuscript, 118)*

In the Fairy's appearances, there are two moments with descending chromatic passages played by the violins, which underscore the two conversations the young boy has with her. The first time, she appears as an old woman, and the second time, as a fairy. This rapid descending chromatic motion reflects the direction of their conversation, with Harap Alb in a hurry since he already knows all the details of the

story. The mysterious atmosphere that should be present—but is disrupted by the all-knowing “Harap Alb”—is, however, maintained in the background by the accompaniment of the harp, celesta, and piano.



Fig. 5. Violin 1. Fairy vanishing chromatic passage (*Capoianu manuscript, 118*)

The canon singing with alternating timbres characterizes the next musical scene titled *The Fairy*, where a shift in sound between the violin and flute can be heard in the film and seen in the score sheets. Here, the composer develops the Fairy’s melodic theme both melodically and rhythmically, incorporating rapid chromatic passages, augmented note values, and expanded intervallic leaps.

Spânul represents an important character in the film, with his negative traits conveyed musically through a chromatic passage in the lower register of the strings, tuba, bassoon, or bass clarinet, depending on the case. Typically, this theme appears whenever he is on screen, plotting something evil, signaling the danger he poses. In the score, this motif is labeled as Spânul’s Territory, marking its first appearance within his domain. However, it also reappears in the musical piece titled *The Fire*, which corresponds in the film to the moment when Harap Alb arrives at the Crai’s court and finds an indescribable massacre, with Spânul as the clear culprit behind the horrors.

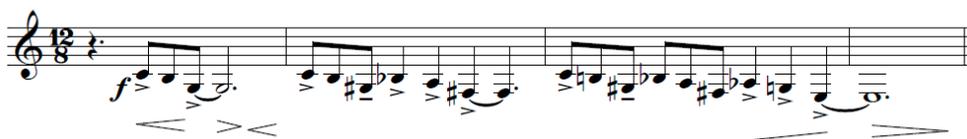


Fig. 6. „Spânul’s” territory. Bass clarinet (*Capoianu manuscript, 118*)

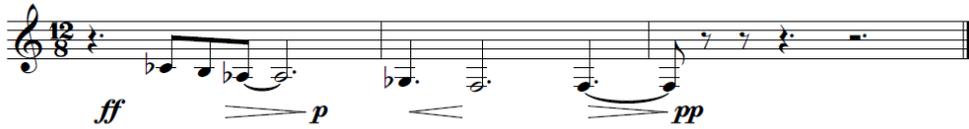


Fig. 7. *Spânu's territory. Tube and trombone (Capoianu manuscript, 118)*



Fig. 8. *Elaboration of the melodic motif Spânu. Trumpet in C. Spânu reveals his identity and begins the battle with "Harap Alb" (Capoianu manuscript, 118)*

In contrast to the gravity of "Spânu's" melodic theme but perfectly aligned with the characters it represents is *Gerilă's March* in 6/8 time. This march is performed both instrumentally and vocally by the other fairytale characters who assist "Harap Alb" in his mission. This march, too, is built upon the generative cell of the heroic motif, though it uses an ascending sixth leap and an inverted third interval.

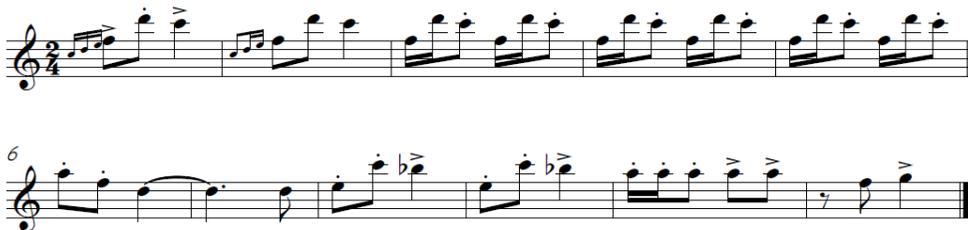


Fig. 9. *"Gerilă's March". The main melodic line performed instrumentally and vocally (Capoianu manuscript, 118)*

5. The Importance of the Brass Section

The composer employs the sound of the brass to instill a sense of combativeness, as well as heroism and grandeur. In the scene where Harap Alb departs with the Bald

Man towards the “Green Emperor”, we encounter another melodic theme - distinctly recognizable and easy for the audience to remember. This melody is structured around intervallic leaps of the octave, minor third, and fourth - intervals that are foundational to the heroic motif. Thus, a kinship can be observed between the heroic motif and this theme, as it alludes to the idea of heroism and victory - a virtue that “Harap Alb” has yet to achieve, being merely the Spânu’s servant at this point. Another instance where a modified version of the heroic motif is played by the brass occurs in the film's finale, when “Harap Alb” awakens from his dream and is chased by his father, realizing that his entire journey to inherit the kingdom was merely his imagination. Ironically, even though the melodic idea accompanies him, “Harap Alb” does not become a true representative of this theme, as the story’s outcome contradicts the notion of his heroism.



Fig. 10. Horn in F. On horses. Harap leaves with “Spânu” to “Green Emperor”. Main melodic theme. (Capoianu manuscript, 118)

6. Conclusions

The entire auditory suggestion of courage and heroism comes to an end when the youngest son of the Crai appears on screen, highlighting the lack of confidence others have in him and his lack of combat skills, as he fails to hit the target with his arrow. Furthermore, satire and ironic humor are introduced in these scenes, which Gopo uses to emphasize the main character’s journey of maturation. Here, the choice to avoid using music as a background is itself a signal of the protagonist’s status, as he is effectively given no sonic identity. This absence of music

communicates his ineptitude more powerfully than satirical melodic ideas might, as he is deemed unworthy even of association with such musical structures.

Interestingly, this approach—of not assigning the main character a melodic theme—persists throughout the film. Instead, he is accompanied by illustrative musical scenes that describe and portray the virtues of the other characters around him. By the end of the film, he is briefly accompanied by the heroic motif played by the brass, yet the on-screen situation creates a contrast with the heroic feeling conveyed by the music, as the audience sees “Harap Alb” being chased by his father after waking up from his dream. This lack of a dedicated theme for the protagonist signifies a key narrative essence: that the hero is imagining it all and is, in fact, on a path to self-discovery and self-empowerment. Unlike the other characters, who have defined personalities reflected through musical themes, “Harap Alb” is yet to find and shape his own identity.

7. References

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