

The Silencing of a Composer – Nicolae Bretan

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Abstract: *During the 20th century, while many artists thrived and enjoyed free expression, numerous others were suppressed by governments, depriving the world of their works. This paper examines the impact of non-musical circumstances, particularly the rise of communist rule in Romania, on the reputation and recognition of composer Nicolae Bretan. Despite his numerous compositions, Bretan's refusal to support the newly empowered communist party led to the silencing of his music in 1948. The focus is on Bretan's vocal music, namely three of his one-act operas, which reflect his desire to create uniquely Romanian operas using Romanian poems and folklore.*

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1. Name of the chapter (Introduction, Methodology etc.)

In 1948, the music of composer, singer, stage-director, and conductor Nicolae Bretan fell silent. It wasn't death that silenced the composer as Bretan would not die for another 20 years. It was due in large part to the now well-publicized list of grievances the Romanian Communist Party (PCR) had against him (Gagelmann, 2000, 74). But there were other contributing factors that started years earlier. Due to more recent, controversial and critical publications, it is necessary to consider these factors more holistically. Gagelmann's biography presents the reader with an idealized view of Bretan. Having interviewed the author in 2004, I found him infatuated with a romanticized view of Nicolae Bretan's music and his life. His view of Bretan as an innocent victim permeates the biography.

Nonetheless, facts remain that were confirmed by the primary source, Judit Bretan, the composer's daughter, that speak to how Bretan was eventually silenced. I spoke with Judit numerous times over a six-year period in phone conversations. I met with her for several days in Cluj in May of 2004 at a festival of Bretan's one-act operas at the Opera Națională Română. Concerning the events in

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Bretan's life, she spoke very passionately. But she did not exaggerate the details of his life. Her recall of facts was consistent over the years I spoke with her, and historical records of the time are consistent with her recollections.

2. Historical Details

Critics have raised questions if indeed the Romanian Communist Party worked to silence Bretan and remove his music from the public. „The uninformed reader, visibly touched by the disturbing story, might conclude that Bretan was one of those important creators, who died unknown, unjustly blamed in postwar Romania, although he composed remarkable music.

However, the careful lecturer shall certainly remark the lack of concrete documents that justify the idea that the personality of the artist was annihilated by the maneuvers of communist ideology” (Iațeșen, 2019). Given the source and details offered by Gagelmann (who had access to Bretan's diaries) and those recalled the by primary source, the composer's daughter, it is necessary that the critic who doubts the truth of the information produce documentation disputing these sources. It is unlikely “documents that justify...” would have been created or if so, archived.

No official government action was required to silence a musician. He merely needs to be omitted from the Composers' Union and/or the Performers' Union whose membership was necessary for employment in the theater. This is what happen in the case of Bretan. He was released from his position at the theater and given a pension of 484 lei. „The Composers' Union suspended him.

On March 11, 1950, the executive committee of the Union in Bucharest advised him as follows: ...”so write new works which, inspired by the realities of the present revolutionary epoch, will mobilize the development of socialism in the land. The petitions submitted by the composer in 1952 and 1954 for reacceptance into the Union were turned down” (Gagelmann 2000, 74).

Judit retold specific details about this situation that would be difficult to invent. In 1948, Tudor Bugnariu, met with Bretan. Bugnariu was “one of the intellectuals seduced by the communist project and ideology in interwar Romania, who later managed to occupy important offices within the RCP/RWP and the state structures.” Even though arrested, questioned, and injured for his political views, “...he remained devoted to the Communist cause” (Bosomitu 2014).

Bretan had interacted with the Bugnariu on several occasions dating back to 1944 when Bretan chaired the committee tasked with reopening the Romanian theater in Cluj. On the occasion in 1948, Bugnariu met with Bretan to convince him

to join the Composer's Union within the Communist Party, something Bretan refused to do. "He made it clear what would happen if Bretan failed to do so." (Gagelmann 2000, 74).

The fact that Bretan was silenced cannot be questioned. After the events of 1948, he never performed, directed, or conducted again. He continued to compose, that being his only creative outlet. But his being silenced had little to do with him being a composer. He was more likely known for the numerous leading roles he had sung over the interwar period in both the Hungarian and Romanian theaters, as well as his stage-direction and conducting in the latter once he left the Hungarian theater. Then in 1944, for the first time in his life, he was working fulltime as an administrator of the Romanian National Theater in Cluj.

Serving as General Manager, Bretan reopened the theater on December 28, 1944. He did not impose himself by featuring his own compositions (as some later critics have accused him of doing) but reopened the theater with three different works to "foster versatility" in the theater (Gagelmann 2000, 64).

Opening night included the „First Romanian Rhapsody" by George Enescu, „Cavalleria rusticana" by Mascagni, as well as a one act play, „Mireasa roşie" by Eftimiu. Bretan's work at the Romanian theater brought him recognition in the years that followed. He was awarded the Order of Merit, First Class for cultural achievements and was elected President of the Romanian-Hungarian Union.

With his success at the theater came greater scrutiny by his critics, especially those in the Communist Party. These critics had long resented his refusal to join the Party as well as his association with other artists of Jewish and Hungarian ethnicities.

3. Bretan's Background

Since his childhood, Bretan had freely associated with Jews, Christians, Hungarians, and Germans. When he was born on March 25, 1887 in Naszód, Hungary (now Bistriña-Năsăud, Romania) in the Transylvania territory, Romanians formed the largest ethnic minority in the area. The population of several cities in Transylvania was over 90% Romanian.

Romanians in Transylvania had quickly become marginalized under 20 years of Hungarian rule which implemented a policy known as centralized Magyarization. The policy set forth, among other things, that the Hungarian language became the official language of the region and was to be used exclusively in all government proceedings and in secondary schools.

Bretan's early education was in Hungarian schools. Soon, he felt the influence of all the cultures who laid claim to Transylvania in his childhood. Bretan would become fluent in all three of the predominant languages in Transylvania, Romanian, Hungarian and German. The son of a Romanian father and a Hungarian mother, he himself married a Hungarian Jewess, Nora Osvát in 1915 (Gagelmann 2000, 30). It is no wonder Bretan never wanted to join the Communist Party and their discrimination against artists due to the nationality or Jewish ethnicity.

Bretan considered himself Romanian first and foremost. His nationalistic pride was evident early in his career when, in 1922 he left the Hungarian theater, which offered him a more lucrative salary, to join the new Romanian theater in Cluj as a leading baritone and second stage director.

One year earlier, his first one-act opera on the epic poem "Luceafărul" by Mihai Eminescu premiered at the Romanian Opera, on February 2, 1921. Over the years that followed, his work at the theater would become an on-again, off-again affair due to personal difficulties with other administrators at the opera. But after World War II, Bretan was appointed Chairman of the Board of the Romanian National Theater in Cluj in 1944. He continued his work there until he was dismissed after refusing to join the Communist Party in 1948.

4. Becoming a Composer

The interwar period was the most active time in Bretan's career. He was occasionally furloughed from his positions at the Romanian Theater. Unable to perform or direct, he stayed creative in these periods by composing. It was also a time when Romania was establishing itself as an independent country.

To this end, Bretan can be seen as an inexperienced, Romanian composer who composed music on Romanian stories to be heard by Romanian audiences. But it is not clear that Bretan ever thought of himself as a composer first over his career as a singer and director.

In her essay, "My Father Nicolae Bretan", Judit wrote: "I loved my father and for that reason, it is not possible for me to speak about him objectively...the man I knew as my father and the person I knew as a singer, stage director, conductor and opera director has gradually faded away to reveal the man I knew the least, the composer" (Bretan, 1996, 9).

After Bretan's death in 1968, Judit began promoting his compositions with a relentless passion. Though there were occasions Bretan's music was heard abroad, Judit spent much time in Romania and large sums of money promoting his music. Some critics look back at her efforts with apparent disdain and noted that other

interwar composers, such as Mihail Jora, could have benefited from such promotion.

„It is obvious that the fabulous enterprise of promoting the musician at theoretical (recordings, articles, a monographic volume) or practical level (organizing recitals, author concerts, setting up performances in the country and abroad, publishing scores in prestigious publishing houses) would have never had the expected impact without the considerable financial support offered by Judit Bretan le Bovit” (Iașeșen 2019). This is no doubt true, and other composers would benefit from such an effort. But to think Judit’s promotion of her father’s music was solely to promote his music is to misunderstand her motive.

Having talked to Judit about her father’s situation after her marriage, it is apparent Judit did what many daughters would do given the opportunity. She worked to restore her father’s reputation and to make right the injustice he suffered. She made little or no profit from her efforts with his music.

5. Bretan’s Music

Bretan’s first opera was an ambitious project. Like many Romanians, Bretan revered the poetry of Mihai Eminescu. Eminescu is generally seen as Romania’s most influential poet. “He is best seen as a man who embodied the national culture, and therefore, through his work, helped to give it shape.” (Triptow 2000, 7).

For a libretto to his first opera, Bretan used Eminescu’s epic poem „Luceafărul”. Bretan set the poem to music with only the slightest alterations to the staggering 392 lines of the poem which are organized into 98 quatrains. The opera debuted in 1921 at the Romanian Opera in Cluj. His dramatic, one-act opera „Gólem Lázádása” debuted in 1924 at the Hungarian theater in Cluj.

Bretan fashioned his “Golem” with his own libretto which he wrote in three languages after a play by Illés Kazcér. Two works difficult to classify include *Eroii de la Rovine* in 1934 which according to Judit “can be seen as a preparatory study for the full-length opera „Horia” Similarly, „Stranie seară de Sedar” is described as an “experimental work”. Composed in 1945, it was devoted to the horrors his wife’s family suffered in the holocaust.

Further indications of his interest in promoting uniquely Romanian culture is seen in his largest opera, „Horia”. This three-act opera is the first Romanian grand opera about heroic deeds of the peasantry in their failed 1784 uprising against the Hungarian landowners in Transylvania.

The opera debuted in 1937 at the Romanian opera in Cluj. Bretan would later compose „Arald”, a one-act with a libretto by the composer based on Eminescu’s poem „Strigoi”. Of Bretan’s more than 200 songs, 24 are on poems by Eminescu. Bretan composed two, long Romanian ballads by George Corşbuc and one by his friend and noted poet, Octavian Goga. He set a total of 20 songs by Goga and 12 other Romanian songs are in print with text by various poets.

Bretan also composed 48 German lieder on poems by various poets including Heine and Rilke and 21 songs on poems by Endre Ady, in addition to another 44 Hungarian songs. He composed nine sacred songs including a „Requiem”, for baritone and mezzo-soprano with organ. Further, he composed five choral works, most for chorus and orchestra. The eight instrumental works he composed were mostly for piano, though two were for orchestra.

5.1. Bretan’s Music, A Singer’s Perspective

The scope of this paper will not allow for a critical analysis of Bretan’s works. Other writers have analyzed them, and I might recommend „The Bretan Case: A Paradox between Value and Promotion” by Loredana Iaşeşen referenced herein.

Also, „The One-Act Operas of Nicolae Bretan” by the author discusses the music in the three recorded operas, „Luceafărul, Golem and Arald”. Many have commented on Bretan’s music with glowing reviews, but more recent reviews are more grounded. Inevitably, and perhaps unfortunately, Bretan is compared with the greatest composers of international fame, including his contemporary, George Enescu. Certainly Judit Bretan, not a musician herself, promoted her father over all others, especially noting his devotion to Romania.

Speaking in general terms, it is important to remember that Bretan only composed when he was unemployed as a singer or director. Composing was seldom his priority when working as a singer/director. When he did compose, he focused most on vocal music. He wrote in a lyric style with a harmonic language that is relatable to the romantic era. He did not experiment with *avant garde* or any 20th century experiments in harmony.

Singers have spoken favorably of Bretan’s operas and songs. The melodies he writes are excellent for the singing voice and well-constructed to account for the singer’s registers. In extreme ranges, he often includes alternate pitches so that singers of various voice types can access his songs. He sets the text carefully, seldom offending the natural syllabic stresses of the text.

Perhaps what is most attractive to singers is that Bretan’s vocal music is extremely expressive. The passion is on the surface. His one-act operas develop quickly, and the singer is engaged vocally from the very beginning. Likewise, the

story in the one-act operas develop quickly, and yet the dramatic nature of the music seems well paced and never forced or out of place.

Having said that about the one-act operas, his grand-opera „Horia” struggles to develop and move the story forward. Further, as some have noted, the orchestra parts are not as well composed.

In general, his music has a simplicity to it. This is most noticeable in Bretan’s songs. Perhaps it was because he never owned a piano, or because he did not play well that the piano accompaniments are simple and often do not support the weight of some of the dramatic vocal lines.

6. Conclusion

Bretan the singer, director, and composer left a large amount of music, music that was composed by a vocalist for vocalists. But after the history of his conflict with the Communist Party has been substantiated and retold, and all the contributing factors that led to his removal from the theater are considered, is there worth in Bretan’s music beyond these revelations?

Looking past the zealous promotions and exaggerations of a dutiful daughter, is there reason to perform Bretan’s music? Scholars have mentioned other interwar composers whose musical training and compositions are more sophisticated and did not have the advantage of such promotion. Yet, performances of Bretan’s music has helped other such composers garner attention.

After some criticism and analysis, the conclusion reached by Iașeșen in the publication „The Bretan Case: a Paradox between Value and Promotion” is well-stated: „Although the sonority of his vocal works is remarkable due to their obvious simplicity and not because of the deliberate simplicity of music, Bretan remains an artist appreciated by performers for the charm of his songs. The talented minor composer is a musician of high cultural value, whose simple creation has a clear effect on melomans [sic] and the capacity to stand the passage of time, beyond any exaggeration”. (Iașeșen, 2019).

The values in Bretan’s music are intrinsic. But beyond the performance of his works, there lies an obligation to undo the injustice done to such composers of this period. Further, there remains an obligation to undo the injustice done to all of us who respect the artistic achievements in Western culture and have been deprived of the artistry of these composers, including Nicolae Bretan.

7. References

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