

Florica Cristoforeanu - 125 years from the birth of our great opera singer

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***Abstract:** Florica Cristoforeanu's art, both vocal and dramatic, was exceptional, supported by a timbre of rare richness and emotional sensitivity in all her roles. One of the outstanding personalities of the world lyric and a tireless ambassador of the Romanian singing school, a great artist in the purest sense of the word and a being of an exceptional humanity. Born in the same year as Cella Delavrancea and Florica Musicescu, 1887, the great Cristoforeanu proposed, as well as the other two representatives of classical music, an original and vigorous interpretive discourse of the art of world singing, highlighting its richness of emotional nature, a unique interpretive aesthetic that only great artists can express in their own particular way.*

***Key-words:** oper voice; stage; soprano; romanian repertoire; Râmnicul Sărat.*

1. Introduction

Great singer of the lyrical scene, Florica Cristoforeanu, to whom this material can be dedicated, less known in her country of origin, is one of the most famous opera performers of the last century. About Florica Cristoforeanu very few know anything today. The interests of the young generation are distancing farther and farther away from these fascinating personalities belonging to the world of opera, not only from universe of Romanian opera but the worldwide one. Unfortunately, this distancing is manifested in relation to the whole world classical music in general, which today is appreciated only by the initiated and by those in loved with opera and not so much by the general public.

2. Objective

The reason of this work is to reveal to all the readers the artistic personality of Florica Cristoforeanu. One of the outstanding personalities of the world lyric and a tireless ambassador of the Romanian singing school, a great artist in the purest sense of the word and a being of an exceptional humanity, was our great singer Florica Cristoforeanu. About her and about her undisputed successes on the most important scenes of the world, the information is not sufficiently disseminated, not even in the musical circles, as it may need to be, to set an example for all of us.

3. Early life

She saw the light of day in Râmnicu Sărat, on May 16, 1886, as the daughter of Vasile Cristoforeanu and Annina Rossi, of Italian origin. She spent her childhood in a house that today is declared a historical monument. Her father, Vasile Cristoforeanu (1859-1896), was mayor of the city (1892-1895), considered the second parent of the city, being recognized for the modernization of Râmnicu Sărat mainly because he brought drinking water to the city. Doing legal studies in Naples (he was the first Romanian doctor of law in Italy) Cristoforeanu

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meets here Annina Rossi, the sister of a colleague from the province of Abruzzi, with whom he married in 1883, then settling in Râmnicu Sărat in 1884. As she recalls, Florica Cristoforeanu was born into a wealthy family, being the first child of four, she mentions: "...because I was born in the month of flowers, I was given the first name Florica." ².

Proving herself from early age, she performed concerts in the yard and in the family home, her parents decided to head her towards singing and piano studies, having the first concert at the age of 10, at the beginning of 1896, the press calling her a prodigy child - wonder child. As a result of the premature death of Vasile Cristoforeanu and due to the precarious material situation, Annina Rossi - Cristoforeanu decides to move with the children to Bucharest, where Florica attends the Silvestru School after she is admitted with the help of Ioan Slavici, her romanian language teacher, who noted her talent. At the request of the same Ioan Slavici, Florica Cristoforeanu participates in a series of performances as a vocal soloist and pianist.

Thus, the one who will become the great Florica Cristoforeanu studied the small piano, and later Belcanto, in Bucharest and Milan at the Conservatory Giuseppe Verdi, with Vaneri Filippi and the distinguished Bodrilla.

About her studies in Milan and her debut, the artist left us a detailed description in her book dedicated to her career. Stories that do not bypass the financial shortcomings, the feeling of being away from family and recounting the efforts made by Annina Rossi to provide the necessary means to continue her studies. She graduated from the prestigious institution with the gold medal.

4. Career

She made her debut at the age of 21, with a recital held in her hometown, in August 1907 and, shortly with another at the Romanian Athenaeum in Bucharest. Her debut in opera will be in the role of Lucia from *Lucia de Lammermoor* by Gaetano Donizetti, in Capodistria in 1908, under the name of Cristina Floreanu, a name under she sings until 1910, in large-scale tournaments in western Europe, returning to Bucharest for operetta shows, in 1910. During the time she sang as a primadonna in Romanian Operetta (1910-1913), she exceeded 100 performances, including in her hometown, with Nae Leonard, V. Maximilian and Nae Ciucurete.

Referring to the period 1910-1913, we cannot easily pass the love affair between the soprano and Nae Leonard, the great tenor, the prince of the operetta, during her glory period of the Romanian operetta. The love story between the two artists began on stage, often being cast as partners in numerous titles. The affair takes place in tournaments in the country, but also in Triest, Vienna or Venice. They appear to have played with the great Romanian tenor Leonard, in Hoffmann's *Stories* by Jacques Offenbach and in operas by Franz Lehár. However, the affair ended once Leonard decided to marry the young Elena Guriță.

From January 1914, until December 1919, Florica Cristoforeanu sings in Italy, giving concerts on the big scenes of the peninsula, but also in Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil and was received with high praise by the press.

More difficult, on a personal level, was the period before Romania entered the war, but after it did, once, on the evening of August 15/28 August, 1916, the performance held at the Quirino Theater in Rome became a manifestation of the sympathy towards her country.

From January 1919, she is invited to take over the management of Città di Milano, where, in addition to the eight weekly shows, she also had to deal with the administration, the

² „...pentru ca m-am născut în luna florilor, mi s-a dat prenumele Florica” Cristoforeanu, Florica, 1964. *Amintiri din cariera mea lirică*. București: Editura Muzicală, p.15.

repertoires, the auditions, producing the most spectacular sets, with elegant, even luxurious costumes. Due to health problems, a rebellious peritonitis and an ulcer, the artist left the scene and in February 1920 left for Turin, where he devoted herself to family life.

Helped by Tullio Serafin she manages with great efforts to persuade her husband Gianni to allow her to return on the stage.

From 1921, until 1940, the artist enters a new stage of the lyric career, largely supported by the great Tullio Serafin, this time in the opera, where she develops a prodigious career, in the great theaters, in Rome, Milan, Genoa, San Carlo, with tours in America, Portugal, Bulgaria, Denmark and Norway, including numerous performances on the Romanian scenes.

Her debut, in *Madama Butterfly* by G. Puccini, at the Dal Verme theater had a warm reception from the public, the newspapers recording no less than ten curtain raises, which demonstrates in the most concrete way the value of her success. In the following years, she performs on Italian scenes, roles in numerous works, such as: *La fanciulla del West* by Giuseppe Verdi, *Manon* by Jules Massenet, *Carmen*, *Fedora*, the season at the Dal Verme theater marking the beginning of a long series of contracts and performing main roles in almost 50 opera titles.

She has performed in opera *Carmen* no less than 200 times, touring the world with this role, from Romania to Capodistria, Copenhagen and Oslo, from Bolzano, Palermo, Cagliari and Triest, to America, Portugal and Bulgaria and so on, her interpretation being most acclaimed "... *the unsurpassed interpretation of the great singer Florica Cristoforeanu, who three years ago had a huge success on the stage of the San Carlo theater, has now been hailed as the best Carmen that we have had lately on our scenes, a role that he triumphantly supported it.*" (Marcu,2012).³

In tournaments in Europe and South America she has performed over 40 roles in famous works, including *Manon* by Jules Massenet, *Carmen* by Georges Bizet and *Salomeea* by Richard Strauss. The growing international fame has led to her performing throughout Europe, especially in Barcelona, as well as at the Teatro Colon, Buenos Aires. She made her debut in the role of *Santuzza* at La Scala, where he also sang systematically, from 1928 to 1932 the role of *Salome* in the opera of the same name by Richard Strauss and in the role of *Mariola* in the opera *Fra Gherardo* in 1928, in the stage production of Ildebrando Pizzetti. In the same period she appeared on the Scaliger stage and in the role of *Carmen* in the opera of the same name as in *Charlotte* in the opera *Werther* by Jules Massenet.

As for the artist's personality, she proved to be a fighter, if we think about the conditions in which she studied and made her debut, she fought fiercely to prove herself, showing a special openness in opposing to the games of agents and artists who were accustomed to pay the audience for applauses. A special moment, which shows her character, is when she refuses to join the Italian Fascist Party (her husband, Gianni, being on the black list of fascists), risking the removal from the big scenes. Also a fact, evoked by baritone Jean Atanasiu from the Romanian Opera, whenever she was in Palermo, the day after a show, she loaded her arms with the flowers received on the stage the day before, she climbed those hills filled with exotic plants and went to the funeral stone of Nicolae Bălcescu's grave.

At present, Romania honors her memory, by naming after her the Florica Cristoforeanu Cultural Center of Râmnicu Sărat, in 1996, on whose facade there is a commemorative plaque with the following text:

³ Marcu, George (coord.), 2012. *Enciclopedia personalităților feminine din România*. București: Editura Meronia

OMAGIU/ MAREI INTERPRETE LIRICE/ FLORICA CRISTOFOREANU/ (1886-1960)/ FIICĂ DE SEAMĂ A/ RÂMNICULUI SĂRAT⁴

Also here, a street bears her name and at the Municipal Museum of Râmnicu Sărat, there is a documentary fund, largely constituted by the donation of Eustațiu Cristoforeanu, made in 1987, a fund that contains photographs, postcards, documents, gramophone recordings, books, articles from the press and articles which refer to her life and activity as an artist. For more than 30 years, a memorial room has been arranged here, which will be restored after the completion of the restoration work of the Museum's headquarters. In Râmnicu Sărat there is also a school that bears the name of Vasile Cristoforeanu and in 2009 the autobiography of the soprano was reprinted. In her memory, a street in Bucharest also bears her name. All these are gestures which show the appreciation that the Romanians grant to Florica Cristoforeanu and her family.

With exceptional vocal qualities that equally covered the ambitus of soprano, mezzo-soprano and contralto, respectively what we now call a Falcon voice, often assimilated with a lyrical mezzo-soprano voice (Munteanu, 2019, 51)⁵, she sang until 1940 when, after a long career, a severe case of angina pectoris forced her to retire. In 1940 she retired permanently from the artistic life and she established herself in Italy with her daughter. In 1948, she left for South America, where her two sisters lived in Brazil for more than 40 years. She died on March 1, 1960, in Rio de Janeiro.

When she retired, she had a repertoire of over 90 roles, having both mezzo-soprano and soprano roles, dramatic, lyrical and even coloratura, belonging to the opera and operetta repertoire. In Bucharest, she sang Cio-Cio-San from *Madama Butterfly* by Giacomo Puccini, Minnie from *La fanciulla del West* by Giuseppe Verdi and her performance in Kundry from the opera *Parsifal* by Richard Wagner and Adrianna Lecouvreur from the opera with the same name, were especially admired.

Her art, both vocal and dramatic, was exceptional, supported by a timber of rare richness and emotional sensitivity in all her roles. Born in the same year as Cella Delavrancea and Florica Musicescu, 1887,⁶ Oprea, 2012, online, Florica Cristoforeanu proposed, as well as the other two representatives of classical music, an original and vigorous interpretive discourse of the art of world singing, highlighting its richness of emotional nature, a unique interpretive aesthetic that only great artists can express in their own particular way.

After her death, her memoirs were published, which she wrote in the last years of her life "*Memories of my lyric career*" - Bucharest, 1964. The volume, written shortly before her death, it is not only an autobiography, but also a lived history of opera and operetta from 1900-1950, finding here information about the destinies of great performers, conductors, managers, about the unwritten laws of the entertainment world, about the working conditions of the artists. The final chapters of the volume – "*Some observations on lyric art and voice education*" - show true pedagogical qualities, being a guide for those who want to find truly useful information, not only about the qualities needed for a lyrical artist, education and maintenance of the voice or vocal interpretation, but also information about the history of music.

⁴OMAGE /TO THE GREAT LIRYC PERFORMER /FLORICA CRISTOFOREANU/ (1886-1960)/ DISTINGUISHED DAUGHTER/ OF RÂMNICU SĂRAT/ Neculaie, Marius. 2013. Râmnicu Sărat- Opere de for public, monumente și plăci comemorative. Buzău. Editura: Editgraph. p. 37.

⁵ Munteanu, Silvia Sorina. 2019. *Manual de canto*. București: Editura Muzicală. p.51

⁶ Oprea, Lucian. 2012 septembrie 2. *Repere singulare ale artei lirice mondiale, Florica Cristoforeanu - In memoriam 125 de ani de la naștere*. Gândacul De Colorado, Ziarul Românilor De Pretutindeni

5. Conclusion

Even though she passed away far from her homeland, the artist was not forgotten, her memory and her career is being evoked after her death in the national and local press, in articles from publications as *Contemporary*, *Doina*, *Courier* (which proposed to erect a statue of artist in Râmnicu Sărat, idea also sustained by O. Moșescu, together with the proposal of a local festival bearing the name of the artist. *Muntenia* publication, mentioning here and the “*Rara avis*” plaque by Constantin Marafet and Mihai Ceaușu, edited under the aegis of Râmnicu Sărat Museum, on the occasion of 110 years from the birth of the soprano, being mentioned also in publications dedicated to the city by authors like Octavian Moșescu, Gheorghe Buzăianu and Dorin Ivan or historians like Valeriu Nicolescu.

It represents a more than sacred duty of the present to promote the values of the Romanian culture that is unfairly thrown into oblivion, values that have been asserted over time as true spiritual boundary stone. Having the extraordinary chance from destiny to write history all over the world and to become true important constituents of the cultural pantheon of our entire creative collective of humanity, and Romanian people has proven itself worthy of this task.

Florica Cristoforeanu represents in this broad context previously drawn, one of the fundamental landmarks of the Romanian and world lyrical space.

Complex personality of her time, one of the unique voices of the Romanian and universal operatic world, if we are to relate to the peculiarity of the voice of this great artist, namely to easily master all the female vocal types, starting from what defines the ambitus of the soprano and reaching up to those of the contralto voice, Florica Cristoforeanu conquered, through the warm sound of her vocal color, the most important operas of the world. Not only her interpretive mastery well known to the general public, but also her individual manner of interpretation, pushed Florica Cristoforeanu on the world’s great lyrical scenes in countries such as Italy, Spain, Denmark, Norway, Argentina, Chile, Brazil.

6. Acknowledgements

The great culture of the world and music in particular, through its language of great accessibility to the public everywhere, always awakens in people’s souls the feeling of the beauty, goodness and the truth with the exceptional artistic act, as well as do all those who dedicated themselves to the great art of lyrical interpretation as Florica Cristoforeanu did all her life.

Florica Cristoforeanu’s career path in years and titles

- 1922 Rome Teatro Adriano Madama Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San)
- 1922 Milan Teatro Dal Verme Madama Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San)
- 1922 Gorizia Teatro Sociale Madama Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San)
- 1923 La Spezia Politeama Duca di Genova Madama Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San)
- 1925 Montecatini Kursaal Boheme (Mimi)
- 1925 Montecatini Kursaal Carmen (Carmen)
- 1925 Milan Teatro Carcano Carmen (Carmen)
- 1925 Bucarest Teatro Nazionale Madama Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San)
- 1926 Lisbon Teatro San Carlos Carmen (Carmen)
- 1926 Milan Teatro Dal Verme Fanciulla del West (Minnie)
- 1927 Lisbon Coliseo Recrejos Boheme (Mimi)
- 1927 Lisbon Coliseo Recrejos Carmen (Carmen)

1927 Lisbon Coliseo Recrejos Cavalleria Rusticana (Santuzza)
 1927 Milan Teatro alla Scala Boheme (Mimi)
 1927 Milan Teatro alla Scala Cavalleria Rusticana (Santuzza)
 1927 Bergamo Teatro Donizetti Carmen (Carmen)
 1928 Brescia Teatro Grande Carmen (Carmen)
 1928 Rome Teatro dell'Opera Carmen (Carmen)
 1928 Bologna Teatro Comunale Carmen (Carmen)
 1928 Santiago del Cile Teatro Municipal Carmen (Carmen)
 1928 Venezia Teatro Rossini Carmen (Carmen)
 1929 Milan Teatro La Scala Carmen (Carmen)
 1929 Rome Teatro dell'Opera Carmen (Carmen)
 1929 Turin Teatro Regio Carmen (Carmen)
 1929 Modena Teatro Storchi Carmen (Carmen)
 1930 Naples Teatro San Carlo Carmen (Carmen)
 1930 Genua Teatro Carlo Felice Fanciulla del West (Minnie)
 1930 Bergamo Teatro Donizetti Madama Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San)
 1930 Lisbon Coliseo Recrejos Carmen (Carmen)
 1930 Lisbon Coliseo Recrejos Madama Butterfly (Cio-Cio-San)
 1931 Triest Teatro Verdi Adriana Lecouvreur (Adriana)
 1931 Bergamo Teatro Donizetti Adriana Lecouvreur (Adriana)
 1932 Parma Teatro Regio Adriana Lecouvreur (Adriana)
 1932 Rome Teatro dell'Opera Adriana Lecouvreur (Adriana)
 1932 Pistoia Teatro all'Aperto Boheme (Mimi)
 1932 Pistoia Teatro all'Aperto Cavalleria Rusticana (Santuzza)
 1934 Rome Teatro dell'Opera Carmen (Carmen)
 1934 Ascoli Piceno Teatro Ventidio Basso Adriana Lecouvreur (Adriana)
 1936 Rome Teatro dell'Opera Adriana Lecouvreur (Adriana)

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