

Mechanical Childhood Impressions – Șerban Marcu's Reception of George Enescu

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Abstract: *George Enescu's reception has undergone many changes over time as a result of the different perspectives from which his creation, interpretative work, personality and pedagogy are analysed and perceived. This study presents the way in which Șerban Marcu's music approaches Enescu's, the Cluj-based composer being stimulated by the N-escu Project initiated by the George Enescu National Museum in Bucharest. Fundamental characteristics of Enescu's style are combined with new approaches, primarily of an aesthetic nature, which place Enescu's music in a contemporary mould. Marcu's compositional idea is analysed correlatively and concretely as it offers an original interpretation of the fundamental landmarks of Enescu's music, in particular the dreamlike childhood memories in his piece Boîte à musique for Jurjac.*

Keywords: *George Enescu reception; Carillon nocturne; Symphony I in E flat major op. 13; Șerban Marcu; mechanical music;*

Introduction

A remarkable project of the George Enescu National Museum in Bucharest has recently encouraged young Romanian composers to approach Enescu's work creatively. Initiated and coordinated by Adina Sibianu, a composer who works as their museographer, in collaboration with Diana Rotaru (CIMRO main coordinator and artistic director of SonoMania) and Sabina Ulubeanu (communication), the N-escu Project has reached its 7th edition, running from 2015 to 2022. The motivation of the project was to stimulate Romanian contemporary creation, through commissions, score editing and first performances. The project brought Enescu's name to the attention of a new generation of Romanian composers as a reference for Romanian musical creation, and its cessation is hugely regrettable.

This study focuses on a work written by composer Șerban Marcu² for the first edition of the N-escu Project (2015). In its first year the N-escu Project invited composers to write a piece featuring an ensemble composed of clarinet, violin, cello and piano, starting from the first theme

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² Born in Brașov (1977), Șerban Marcu learned to play the clarinet and the piano. He began composing while still a pupil at the Art High School in Brașov. He studied composition with Cornel Țăranu at the Gheorghe Dima Academy of Music in Cluj-Napoca; after graduation he remained as a professor at the Academy. In 2006 he obtained his PhD in music with a thesis discussing aspects of contemporary writing in his own works for voice and orchestra. He attended masterclasses in composition held by Osvaldas Balakauskas, Vinko Globokar, Petr Kotik, Marek Kopelent and Dan Dediu. Characteristic of his style is a conscious use of musical material, resulting in coherent structures, while taking into account the expressiveness of the artistic message. An avid reader, Șerban Marcu has drawn inspiration for many of his works from literature. He composed two operas (*Lecția* [The Lesson] on a Eugène Ionescu play and *Tinerețe fără bătrânețe și viață fără de moarte* [Youth Without Old Age and Life Without Death] on an ancient Romanian fairy tale), two ballets on Ancient Greek subjects (*Arahneea* and *Orfeuidice*), songs on lyrics by Lucian Blaga and Elena-Maria Șorban, choral works (mostly for church), and chamber music.

of Enescu's Symphony no. 1 in E-flat major, op. 13. The theme was characterised by the late Pascal Bentoiu as a “noble coat of arms”³, and to this day it accompanies every publicity clip announcing the return of the Enescu Festival.

1. Analysis of first theme of the Enescu Symphony

As Bentoiu notes, the first theme of the Symphony is “full of potentialities such as only the themes of the great Beethovenian symphonies – and in their wake the creations of Franck or Bruckner – have offered examples”⁴. Some of these correspondences will be mentioned below to assist with the following analysis⁵.

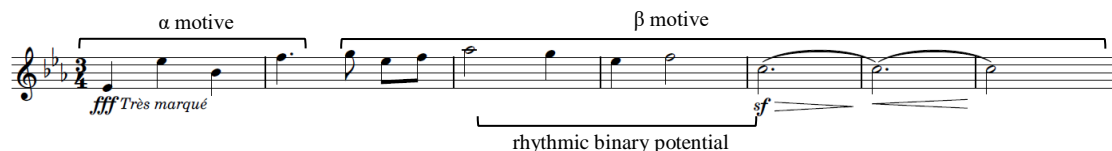


Fig. 1. *George Enescu, Main Theme of Symphony no. 1, bars 1-7*

The Symphony's thematic material represents a visionary act for the time of the young Enescu. Although at the time the Symphony was composed the actual concept of “musical gesture” had not yet been established in the vocabulary of musicians, Bentoiu analytically captures the young composer's intuition: “I am almost tempted to call them not motives but musical *gestures*, because what is important is not so much the routes themselves as their general sense of heroic adventure and the dazzling orchestral light in which they are bathed. This is a phenomenon of marked modernity that has been – it seems to me – overlooked”⁶.

Moreover, the audacity of Enescu's creation has been repeatedly stressed: “Each of the paths Enescu took in this period could have resulted in the moulding of a great composer; but Enescu preferred to abandon these paths in order to keep seeking others”⁷.

Analysing the theme of Symphony no. 1, Bentoiu immediately underlines its potential both melodically and rhythmically. Its two main motives (α and β) create a contrast of melodic profile (the bold leaps of the α motive, exposed “in unison, with the same fundamental confidence in the power of the melodic fact”⁸, are followed by the β motive, with a much restricted ambitus), while our renowned analyst also notes that the rhythm of the β motive is complex in its ambiguity, in that Enescu constructs it in such a way that it can be framed in both duple or triple time⁹ (see Figure 1). This process of “rhythmic ambiguity” will also be used by

³ “stemă nobiliară”. Pascal Bentoiu. 1984. *Capodopere enesciene*. București: Editura Muzicală, p. 95.

⁴ “este încărcată de potențialități așa cum numai temele marilor simfonii beethoveniene – și pe urmele lor creațiile unor Franck sau Bruckner – au mai oferit exemple”. Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁵ Other analysts offer a much wider spectrum. See Noel Malcolm. 2011. *George Enescu: viața și muzica*. București: Humanitas, p. 103.

⁶ “Aproape că sunt tentat să le numesc nu motive ci *gesturi* muzicale, pentru că importante nu sunt atât traseele în ele însele cât sensul lor general de avânt eroic și lumina orchestrală orbitoare în care sunt scăldate. Este vorba aici de un fenomen de marcată modernitate care a fost – mi se pare – trecut cu vederea”. Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁷ “jeder der Wege, die Enescu in dieser Periode einbrachte, die Gestaltung eines großen Komponisten bestimmt haben könnte; aber Enescu zog es vor, diese Wege zu verlassen, um immer wieder andere zu suchen”, in: Corneliu Dan Georgescu. 2019. *Atemporal Music. Archetypes. Ethnomusicology. Romanian Composers. Studies and Musicological Essays*. București: Muzeul Național “George Enescu” – Universitatea Națională de Muzică din București – Editura Muzicală, p. 359. *Apud* Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁸ “la unison, cu aceeași încredere fundamentală în puterea faptului melodic”. Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

⁹ Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

Șerban Marcu for the benefit of his own vision of Enescu's theme, as he summons a deliberately childlike spirit with the help of rhythmic variations inspired by children's folklore.

2. *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac* by Șerban Marcu

2.1. The declared programme of the piece

Șerban Marcu approached Symphony no. 1 by positioning himself at a considerable, safe distance from the original, assuming an overtly postmodern attitude independent of the historical and stylistic load of the original. The concert notes of the first performance capture the poetic idea from which the miniature was “born”. The work uses three short quotations from the beginning of Enescu's Symphony no. 1, metamorphosing them and bringing them into a sonorous ambience that makes one think of the musical box, in a false biographical argument: the author of the piece imagines that Enescu, as a child (Jurjac is the nickname used by Enescu's parents and close friends during his childhood), had a musical box whose simple melodies became, in Enescu's creative subconscious, the themes of Symphony no. 1. At the end of the piece, the composer also quotes the finale of the piano work *Carillon nocturne* (the last, seventh part of Piano Suite no. 3, op. 18) – a small piece written “for the music box”, taken from Enescu's own creation¹⁰.

Using, therefore, a “false biographical argument”, a situation imagined in Jurjac's childhood, Șerban Marcu adopts the musical typology for mechanical instruments, which disengages his piece from the aesthetic model of the Enescu symphony from its conception.

2.2. Analysis of Enescu quotations and structuring of the piece

The piece *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac* exists in two versions with minimal differences in content: the first is for clarinet and piano, while the second adds a violin to form a trio (this paper and its musical examples relates to the trio version of the piece, whose differences are simply small timbral adaptations).

The composer has included in this piece three fragments from the symphony's first theme, which he has folded into his own naïve-nostalgic-creative perspective.

- 1) Motive α , the incisive, resolute opening of theme I, full of verve, conquering (see Figure 2);
- 2) Motive β ;
- 3) The motif we call γ , significantly in the orchestral tutti (bar 17ff., violin I, from Enescu's score; see Figure 5 later on);

Fig. 2. Șerban Marcu, *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac*, bars 9-12

¹⁰ Șerban Marcu. 2015. “Music box for Jurjac”. In *Programm Notes “N-escu”* from May 17th, 2015 held at Aula Palatului Cantacuzino, Calea Victoriei 141. București: Muzeul Național “George Enescu” – Bucureștiul Creativ, p. 1.

Marcu pays particular attention to the accompaniment, which imitates the droning mechanism of a musical box and the syntactic pattern of looped repetition. The same two measures return, in an automatism imitating the mechanism, to substantiate the fascination of the imagined Jurjac with the illusory representation of a musical box (see Figure 2). The interruptions in the flowing sound of the music box are abrupt and violent (arpeggios that are clearly disjointed, inhomogeneous and foreign), bringing the musical discourse to a hasty halt, while the resumption of the music box mechanism brings a certain reassurance and allows the imagination to flow, continuing to develop its thematic inventions (see Figure 3).

Fig. 3. Şerban Marcu, *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac*, bars 13-19

The Symphony's first theme unfolds over sparse harmonic support, rhythmically figurative, sometimes arpeggiated, in a consistently complementary rhythmical pattern. The major seventh, minor ninth and *sixte ajoutée* intervals serve the composer's poetic idea of imitating a musical box, and these are also key intervals in *Carillon nocturne*, where Enescu uses the same *imperfect* intervals to mimic the natural tempered reverberation of the bells.

Boîte à musique pour Jurjac opens with a short introduction (bars 1-8) announcing the mechanical ostinato of the piano, consisting of 1) the oscillating major second (the subtone) which reinforces the middle register E-flat on 4/4 downbeats, 2) crotchets enhanced with embellishments, with emphases on F and B-flat on the bar's weaker beats (anticipating the pitch content of the theme E-flat – B-flat – F), and 3) the enrichment of the harmonic spectrum with new dissonant elements. Progress is stopped again by a broken, uneven arpeggiation, as a mark of the end of each section in the form (see Figures 2 and 3).

Fig. 4. Şerban Marcu, *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac*, bars 23-26 (α and β motives)

The first thematic section proper begins with bar 9, when the same ostinato prepares the clarinet's α motif entrance in bar 11 (see Figure 2). The development of the α motif is interrupted by the zigzag of the rapid arpeggio, stopping the development of the mechanical music which the violin has become involved with for the first time. Without having had a chance to develop sufficiently, the next section presents the β motif in a distinctive rhythmic system taken from children's folklore. A new stop follows by way of another disorganised arpeggio, the β motif left unable to display its variational or developmental potential. Instead, the next section (starting at bar 23) presents both the Symphony theme's motifs α and β in a much larger section, this time seen through the lens of children's folk rhythms (see Figure 4). Supported by the poetic metaphor of the musical box (the ostinato in the introduction), it is only here that the listener fully understands the game proposed by the composer: the development of the Enescu themes, through rhythmic variations derived from children's folklore, over an accompaniment which imitates a musical box.

Fig. 5. George Enescu, *Symphony no. 1, 1st movement*, bars 17-23 (Violin I)

The game, once mastered, is abandoned for a developing section for the first time in the piece, in which the γ motif (the end of the phrase which begins at bar 17 in the first violin – see Figure 5) is subjected to sequencing and variation, and through its dialogic insistences (between clarinet and violin) crosses several tonal centres. The piano accompaniment in turn becomes saccadic, squeezing the dystonic acciaccaturas into virulent block chords (see Figure 6). The section dominated by the γ motif is the dynamic culmination of the piece, where the amount of musical information is the densest, in a pseudo-Beethovenian spirit, starting from just three pitches. The contrast to the earlier and later sections is absolute. A final occurrence of the γ motif, in the clarinet's chalumeau register, ends this explosive section.

Fig. 6. Șerban Marcu, *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac*, bars 74-77

The follow-up is a new contrast. Marcu recasts the Enescu quotations and concentrates on children’s folklore. The fragments of Enescu themes are reshaped to make way for a diatonic, cantabile *legato innocentemente* melody presented by the clarinet (see Figure 7), accompanied by the mechanical harmony from the beginning (measures 84-132). Once fully exposed, the melody is resumed fragmentarily, suggesting a search for or a recollection of sounds. This section ends with the iteration of the last sounds of the melody.

Fig. 7. Șerban Marcu, *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac*, bars 90-95

Remembrance turns into foreshadowing – the main idea of Șerban Marcu’s piece – because, in the end, only the last five sounds (an E-flat major pentachord – see the last two bars from Figure 7) are preserved, which, transformed into the main pillars of the E-flat major arpeggio, form a premonitory change into a last, revealing, Enescu quotation from *Carillon nocturne* (Figure 8).

Fig. 8. Şerban Marcu, *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac*, bars 150-158

Bars	1-8	9-15	16-22	23-35	36-83	84-132	133-153	154-158
Sections	Introduction	α	β	$\alpha + \beta$	γ	Children folk-like melody inspired by Enescu motives	Transition	Carillon

Table 1. *Formal sections from Şerban Marcu’s Boîte à musique pour Jurjac*

The summary in Table 1 shows the concise form of the piece, consisting of the main sections and variational processes of the Enescu motifs.

In fact, Şerban Marcu’s piece gathers together the imagination of the birth of the theme-emblem in a foreshadowing child’s play, but takes it through a process specific to Enescu – that of the “erasure of oppositions”. This unquestionable quality of the Enescu style is “put into action both through successive thematic approximations and through continuous contrapuntal overlapping, of course also through the process of anticipation; there is a progressive transformation of the musical idea, either an encompassing *in the same image* of mainly opposite profiles, or a play of anticipations and discrete reminiscences”¹¹.

In a synthetic view of “Enescu’s Musical Time” Corneliu Dan Georgescu takes a complex approach, in which he places Enescu’s work predominantly in the heritage of the developmental-Germanic tradition, following the triad progression – direction – entropy, as opposed to the governance of minimalism by the triad iteration – repetition – redundancy. From this point of view, Şerban Marcu’s piece *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac* is at the opposite pole

¹¹ “[Ea] este pusă în acțiune atît prin succesive apropieri tematice, cît și prin continuă suprapunere contrapunctică, desigur și prin procedeele anticipării; se produce deci fie o transformare progresivă a ideii muzicale, fie o cuprindere în aceeași imagine a unor profiluri principal opuse, fie un joc de anticipații și rememorări discrete”. Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

from its source of inspiration. Any comparison of Enescu's music with automated repetition is ill-advised because he is at heart a developer of musical material. When he brings back musical material in multiple variations he does so with variations which are subtle but eventually transfigure and bring together opposing themes, to diminish their contrast for the sake of unity, of maintaining an undulating but "continuous musical flow in a directed music"¹².

Thus, Marcu's music approaches, in terms of musical writing and atmosphere, Ravel's. Not the Ravel of *Bolero* – inspired and impressed by the macro-industry of factories and giant machines – but the Ravel who weaves in the filigree of chamber music, in which "the procedures of stylisation and of breaking away from models are perfected and make it possible to achieve a new degree of realism in sonority and immediate expressiveness"¹³. It is also for the same reason – the lack of what might be called Beethovenian development of the musical material (the contrasting middle section is used by the composer specifically to underline its opposition to the "mechanisation" of the music) – that Marcu brings a single, entirely faithful quotation at the end of the piece. It is noteworthy that the source is a "line" from *Carillon nocturne*. A piece that imitates the sonority of carillons, and the only Enescu work which does not shy away from repeating musical ideas identically – a delight of the aural music radiating from unique chords¹⁴ – *Carillon nocturne* is a piece so singular and so unique that it even stands out from the image formed of Enescu, and is yet further proof of his complexity and creativity, which fully reinforces Georgescu's statement: "*To be original without stylistic limitations* – this seems to be Enescu's ideal"¹⁵. Under Marcu's intuition, however, the carillons gracefully become the sonority of a musical box with chord mixtures of "major sixth and seventh, or with an augmented octave"¹⁶.

3. Conclusions – Marcu's personal reception of Enescu

Referring to Alfred Alessandrescu's overly simplistic analysis of Symphony no. 1, Pascal Bentoiu rightly points out that "anyone can follow and control the exposition of the musical material (Introduction – A – B – C), but what follows has a strong air of development defined by the sequenced repetitions of the motives, by the very extensive harmonic flight (...), by the contrapuntal interweaving and – implicitly – by the changing character of some of the themes"¹⁷. The perspective proposed by Marcu deliberately bypasses this substantial quality of Enescu's music; on the contrary, the work of the contemporary composer is distinguished by its mechanically imposed, automated, but also naïve and clear character.

If Bentoiu characterises through a realist-euphoric oxymoron Symphony no. 1 as a "cry of joy"¹⁸, "a continuous aspiration towards an ideal of beauty, light and truth, almost a

¹² Corneliu Dan Georgescu, *op. cit.*, p. 316.

¹³ Thomas Kabisch. "Ravel, Maurice". *MGG Online*, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2024, from <https://www.mgg-online.com/article?id=mgg10637&v=1.1&rs=mgg10637&q=ravel>.

¹⁴ Clemansa Liliana Firca. 2005. *Enescu: relevanța "secundarului"*. București: Editura Institutului Cultural Român, p. 74, 76.

¹⁵ "A fi original fără limitări stilistice – acesta pare a fi idealul lui Enescu". Corneliu Dan Georgescu, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

¹⁶ "cu sixth și septimă mare sau cu octavă mărită". Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 554.

¹⁷ "Oricine poate urmări și controla expoziția materialului muzical (Introducere – A – B – C), dar aceea ce urmează are un aer de dezvoltare puternic definit de reluările secvențate ale motivelor, de voiajul armonic foarte extins (...), de întreșeserea contrapunctică și – implicit – de schimbarea caracterului unora dintre teme". Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

¹⁸ "Strigăt de bucurie". Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

metaphysical impatience”¹⁹, Marcu’s piece slips into the subtext of an imaginary yet plausible story, showing valences of Enescu’s music that analysts have repeatedly marginalised, even if they have not quite been outright denied. The final result of Marcu’s piece seems to evade the essential characteristics of Enescu’s style: “[1] singular ethos in the context of the century; [2] the very wide range of his compositional preoccupations; [3] an informational load of exceptional density in his great works”²⁰. In this piece we will find neither that dreamy longing nor the stylistic eclecticism that generates informational density, but we witness a re-territorialisation of the Enescu theme, adapted to a contemporary context. Analysing his work, we find in Enescu intuition of several compositional directions of the time, even preceding orientations developed later with great amplitude, but which he himself applied neither systematically nor consistently, remaining at the stage of intuitive inspiration (the use of quarter tones being one example; spectralism another – the piece *Carillon nocturne*, “which has no common denominator with any other”²¹, was composed in 1916). In *Boîte à musique pour Jurjac* we find a similar marginal direction, inspired from mechanical gears, but unlike the scale of the entire influx brought about by industrialisation, here it is “captured” in the intimacy of the family and in the innocence and frivolity of the play with a musical box, seen from imagined mechanical memories.

Finally, a legitimate question for such a theme. Can we consider Şerban Marcu’s piece as influenced by Enescu’s style? The answer must evidently be no. The piece does not even propose such an affiliation. However, the analysis of Marcu’s quotation of *Carillon nocturne* raises a question, accepted by not analysed in detail in Romanian musicology, of whether to associate Enescu’s striking piece with 1) the *bucium* (alphorn) signal²²; 2) with the French filiation (Debussy impressionism, or from the point of view of notation following the model of Piano Concerto no. 5 by Camille Saint-Saëns), which he surpassed in a complex and visionary act²³; or 3) with a harvest song from Făgăraş (the author states with noteworthy precaution²⁴), but using the sonority of the carillon²⁵. In his piece, Şerban Marcu artistically develops precisely this last (and, from a musical point of view, we believe, the most viable) interpretation, in which Enescu’s game of bells is transformed, through hypothetical biographical diminution, into a premonitory game of a musical box, a little jewel with the help of which Jurjac discovers a sonorous universe that will be fulfilled years later. The common denominator of the two pieces, however, is a naïve insatiability of euphonious reverberations, which – regardless of the passage of time – could easily last forever.

¹⁹ “o aspirație continuă către un ideal de frumusețe, lumină și adevăr”. Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

²⁰ “[1] ethos [...] singular în ambianța secolului; [2] evantaiul[...] foarte larg al preocupărilor [...] componistice; [3] încărcătur[ă] informațională, de excepțională densitate în marile sale lucrări”. Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²¹ Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 554.

²² Rodica Oană-Pop, “*Suita pentru pian nr. 3, op. 18* de George Enescu – considerațiuni stilistice”. *Lucrări de muzicologie* 6: 48–60, p. 53.

²³ Francisc László. 2006. “George Enescu: *Carillon nocturne*. Mențiuni istorice, analitice și critice”. *Muzica* 1: 45–49; Pascal Bentoiu, *op. cit.*, p. 554–555.

²⁴ “Surprinzătoarele asemănări dintre cele două melodii [...] nu denotă, se înțelege, referirea lui Enescu la ‘modelul’ cântecului de seceriș transilvănean; ele se datorează fondului de sensibilitate românească a compozitorului” [“The surprising similarities between the two songs [...] do not, it is understood, denote Enescu’s reference to the ‘model’ of the Transylvanian harvest song, they are due to the composer’s background of Romanian sensibility.”] Clemansa Liliana Firca, *op. cit.*, p. 75–76.

²⁵ Clemansa Liliana Firca, *op. cit.*, p. 73–77.

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