

The composer Nicolae Bretan and his creation of lieder on Mihai Eminescu poetry

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Abstract: Nicolae Bretan, composer who wrote over 230 lieder, ordinary at first sight, without too many moments of virtuosity, but which spread a state of mind dominated by a deep sense of humanism, has been lately rediscovered, by both the critics and especially by the interpreters. His musical language was inspired and sustained by the poems of Mihai Eminescu, Victor Eftimiu and Lucian Blaga, but also by those of Reiner Maria Rilke, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Petöffy Sandor.

The interpreter's mission is to touch the audience's hearts, through text and music, a first step being precisely decoding the two languages, because the moment of creation does not end with completing the lied by the composer, but shapes up and becomes vocal with its usage. If the vocal execution is inadequate, the so called musical values remain either unexpressed or misunderstood.

Key-words: vocal music; lied; interpretation; voice;

1. Introduction

Like other fields the musical one represents the result of the complementary interaction between practice and theory. The aesthetic of the musical interpretation possesses several formative valences, targeting all the resorts of the stage setting, both the musical ones and those regarding the theatrical attitude. To stylistically interpret a lied, since we shall direct our attention to this type in what follows, means to consider two standards of textual issues, the musical one and the literary one. The elements of cohesion are relevant as significance, relations of interdependence, interaction, coherence, compatibility, among the elements that form it.

The lied as genre of cultivated music although appears in Classicism, it takes shape and develops in Romanticism, at the beginning of the XIXth century, being considered as one which characterises the Romantic thinking and sensibility. The Romanian music fits in the general trend of the time, reflecting, in a specific manner, the main trends of the period.

2. Objectives

This analysis has as main purpose the applicative research and implies an approach with educational aspects. The formation and the development of the abilities of students and master students in the specialization Musical interpretation-Canto, in the stylistic-aesthetic research is desirable for a future career, which aims both practice and theory, and the projection, organizing, unfolding and utilisation of the theoretic research in the artistic creation, by elaborating and using some theoretic-informative and practice-action instruments and by implementing a pattern of training for a future lieder concert as well, is essential.

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3. Nicolae Bretan, short biography

The Romanian composer, bariton and director of opera, Nicolae Bretan was born on the 25th of March 1887, at Năsăud. Because during the Second World War he lived in Hungary, he is claimed by the Hungarian culture. (cf. Bretan Le Bovit, 2013) After studying at the Conservatoire in Cluj (1906-1908), he attends the classes of the Music Academy in Viena (1909) and Budapest (1912), and in 1916 he becomes licentiate of the Letters Faculty in Cluj. He became known as bariton, activating among others, at the Opera Houses in Bratislava, Budapest and Cluj, being also a director here (the Hungarian Opera), and then manager at the Romanian Opera.

As a composer he wrote over 230 lieder, considered by the critics as wonderful for the singers, on Romanian poets lyrics (Mihai Eminescu, Victor Eftimiu, Lucian Blaga), Hungarian poets (Ady Endre, Petöffy Sandor) and German poets (Reiner Maria Rilke, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe), because, and this is important to underline, Bretan spoke fluently, besides Romanian, Hungarian, German and English. He wrote five operas, the vocal-symphonic poem *Luceafărul* (Morning star), religious works, among which a *Requiem for choir and organ*. For him the lied, more accurate the song, is at the same time, the laboratory of creation where he moulds his work, but it is also a state of mind, for he recolects himself in lied in times of war that killed and crippled consciences, searching in song the lost silence and intimacy. He writes his lieder fair, without looking for vocal virtuosity at all costs, with music in the middle voice register, spreading an optimistic state of mind. He passed away on December the 1st 1968, at Cluj-Napoca.

4. The lieder creation on Mihai Eminescu poetry

The musicologist and musical critic Viorel Cosma notices the diversity of form and musical genres that Eminescu's poetic universe took in the Romanian vocal creation: "From lied to romance, choral miniature and even pop music, to opera, ballet, oratorio, cantata and symphony, Eminescu's literary heritage permanently received the XXth century composers appreciation." And affirms the special place his lieder have, "especially since Eminescu's poetry has also been translated to Hungarian, German and English." (Cosma, 2000, 184)

The composer being aware of the fact that Eminescu's poems have a structural and defining role for the art of lied, understanding that the poetical images "deeply trouble the subconscious, that those verbal images must be weighed and transposed in rhythm and harmony with a precise and yet ineffable artistic skill" (Bretan, 1993, XI), composed each lied in a different manner.

On Mihai Eminescu's poetry Bretan composed, being "completely fascinated, for over half a century, by Eminescu's lyrics" (Cosma, 2000, 186), a number of 26 lieder, the first one in 1901, the last one, in the 50s of the XXth century, representing the development over three epochs of his composing activity: the late Romanticism, until 1914, the inter-war and post-war Post-Romanticism. These lieder have been characterised as being intensely vibrating and sincere, some "arousing the admiration of Romanian and foreign interpreters and scientists" (Cosma, 2000, 186), considering them true masterpieces, bearing the feeling, which the Romanian call *dor*, and the foreigners nostalgia, the first being a much meaningful term to describe the feeling which embrace the inhabitants of the Carpathian-Danube-Pontic space.

Nicolae Bretan "miraculously blends music and text, melodic richness and rigorous structural economy. Bretan's musical purity is a simpleness that controls and hides the complexity. Without juggling with it, Bretan knew his instrument perfectly: the human voice." (Bretan, 1993, XII) "Indeed, the experience as an opera singer of the Transylvanian musician fully emerged into the vocal miniature, where Eminescu's lyrics and the lyric

melody, impregnated with the specific Romanian feeling (dor-nostalgia), blend together in the most perfect way.” (Cosma, 2000, 187)

5. The stylistic-interpretative characteristics of the analysed lieder

At Bretan each poem is delicately treated, with a certain devotion and respect and although the "reign" of his lieder is characterised by lyricism, each piece is at the same time unique, different from the others. (Gagelmann, 1998, 145)

The shape of his songs is of stanza most of the time, with phrases organised on themes, the solo voice moving smoothly, without constrains of intensity, timbre, articulation and sounds concur on time unit, because the voice tells a story, Nicolae Bretan remaining in the history of the Romanian music as an introvert, full of lyricism.

Although apparently the melodic line of Bretan's lieder is severe and plain, it spreads profound philosophic meditation, marked by the author's sensibility and the lyricism of the whole musical discourse. It is necessary to make an observation: when we say his songs are simple we do not mean they are easy, simplistic, on the contrary, the author's skill and personality made the lieder carefully elaborated, filled with deep human emotions.

Though at first sight they seem easy to perform, because Bretan seldom uses exceptional rhythmic formulae, they have hidden complexities, both vocal and interpretative, which must be considered, music being in close relationship with the text, the composer proving great skill in using the resonance of the language vowels, which give through sound articulation aesthetic musical sense.



Even though the musical discourse which contributes to making the lieder accessible, is usually placed in the middle voice register, sometimes the pitch is moved towards the sharp one, thing that forces the interpreter to possess high vocal technique knowledge, to obtain an accurate resonance, a tone rich in harmony, at all registers and intensities of the entire vocal range, extremely important and difficult elements in voice education. From this point of view, one may assert that the parameter of sounding height is not desired to be, in the composer's view, an element of constriction for the addressability of the lied creation, but on the contrary, to allow it to be approached by a large variety of interpreters, from the formation level, to the most experienced vocal musician-interpreter.

It is to be noticed the fact that both in flat and sharp the voice achieves through a gradual development, alongside with the accompanying piano. This reality proves beyond any doubt that the statement formulated by professor Fred Calland is accurate: "Many composers on the classical and romantic periods acted as directors of their own operas. Usually they conducted the first several performances. But where is the singing composer? Schubert? Schumann? Strauss? Wolf? Chausson? Duparc? Debussy? None was known for his ability to sing. The great song composers thus did not have access to that very core of Western music, that activity of the opera singer" (Bretan, 1993, XIII)

The role of the singer is to ensure a profound musical feeling, as close as possible to the ideal and to transmit it to the listener, individual and collective. The spectator will react at first empathically to the exposed emotional state, later on critically. With this latter reaction to the artistic creation, the spectator has the chance to meditate on the living experience, on his own existence. That is why the role of the interpreter is very important, because it does

not matter the number of the persons in the audience, it matters how they leave from that performance.

The present study, elaborated after interpreting the above analysed lieder at different contests (the most important, the one in the honour of the composer, from Cluj Napoca where I was awarded the *Nicolae Bretan* prize) and concerts, leads to materialization of some possible recommendations. First I wish to highlight, beside the technical difficulties, especially the problems concerning the emotional load of interpreting the lied. If on the opera stage the artist is accompanied by the orchestra, supported by the choir, with the role patterned by costumes and scenography, with helping elements in elaborating the part, in vocal miniature there is only the poetic text as unique source, indeed shaped more or less discretely as nuance and polyphonic harmony load by the harmonies of the accompanying instrument, and the special psychological mobility, that is the capacity of the interpreter to go from one psychological state to another, according to the literary and musical text, by the character given by the composer to his work, in a nut shell, by the deep theoretic study of the singer, targeting the creation, because the score needs sensibility in execution, expressiveness in gestures and mimic, balance in construction, logical in phrasing.

Regarding the vocal technique, we underline the importance of the breath management, the meaning of an accurate sound, the necessity of a perfect diction, the search for normality in execution and the removal of any unjustified stretching of the phonation apparatus.

We, the interpreters know that the role of the one who executes a score is ultimate, because in the absence of his artistic message "the music is left inside the pages of the score is as if it had never existed." (Bălan, 1965, 211) The encounter with the beauty of the sounding relations become part of a language which cannot be translated but through itself, produces an exceptional feeling both to the interpreter and to the listener. It is the transposing of the vision graphically drawn by the composer in real music. This is unthinkable without the interpreter. The listener receives the second creation of the work, the one from the interpreter, not the first, the one from the composer.

6. Conclusions

The mission of the singer who interprets the Bretan's lieder on the lyrics of the one called the *unmatchable poetis* reduced "Given these songs which penetrate the listener's psychic, that stir his humanity, that increase his sense of beauty, the singer's work is extremely diminished. And the singer who sings Bretan is already far away, ahead, on the paths which lead to his public's mind and soul." (Bretan, 1993, XI) But to be true artist, he must train his interior force, his spirit, and his capacity to express in the material world, under artistic form, and not just to reproduce sounding relations. In the vocal interpretation, for each form there is an aesthetic request, and for each request there must be a method of using the specific techniques, because in order for the vocal-musical act to represent an artistic creation at the highest level, a discipline and complete mastering of the voice is demanded, if not there cannot be a real interpretation. The communion composer-interpret-public and the feed-back relationship are the essence of the musical phenomenon that we are in service of, and the warning given by Dinu Lipatti, "Do not use music, but be of music use!" (Tănăsescu, 1962, 3), remains forever true.

7. References

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