

INTERVIEW

WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY MUSICOLOGY: A CONVERSATION WITH VALENTINA SANDU-DEDIU

Dr. Valentina Sandu-Dediu is one of the most influential contemporary Romanian musicologists whose academic and artistic activity has contributed significantly to the study of Romanian and European music culture. Her work combines research, teaching, editorial activity and performance, creating an interdisciplinary perspective on music history, stylistics and cultural identity. She graduated from the National University of Music in Bucharest in 1990 with a degree in musicology and later earned her Doctorate in



Music in 1995 (Dissertation: Stylistic and Symbolic Hypostases of Mannerism in Music). Her work focuses especially on Romanian post-war music, musical rhetoric, stylistics and the relationship between music and cultural history. In addition to her academic achievements, she is also known as a pianist and editor of important musicological publications. Her professional trajectory reflects a combination of rigorous academic training, international experience, and sustained scholarly activity, which has established her as one of the leading representatives of Romanian musicological scholarship in the international academic community. Her intellectual development has



been shaped by research fellowships and academic residencies in Vienna, Berlin and other major European institutions, which contributed significantly to her interdisciplinary approach to musicological inquiry. Dr. Valentina Sandu-Dediu is the recipient of the Romanian Academy Prize, as well as multiple awards granted by the Union of Composers and Musicologists of Romania. Her international recognition includes distinctions from the Ernst von Siemens Foundation and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences Prize awarded by the Peregrinus Foundation.

At present, Dr. Valentina Sandu-Dediu serves as the Rector of the Institute for Advanced Study at New Europe College in Bucharest, where she also coordinates and supports international research programs in the humanities and social sciences. Here, at New Europe College I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Sandu-Dediu about her life, work and her vision of musicology as an interdisciplinary field through her perspective as a leading female scholar in contemporary European academia.

Professor Sandu-Dediu, if we begin from the present moment, how would you define yourself today: as a musicologist, a cultural mediator, or something beyond these categories?

I would prefer to remain, first and foremost, a musicologist.

To better understand your professional development, let us first look at your educational background and academic formation. Looking back at your formative years at the Liceul de muzică „George Enescu”, what intellectual or artistic impulses proved decisive for your later path?

My parents placed great importance on my education, and they did so in a strict manner that is no longer common today. They provided me with everything I needed, but they also demanded a lot from me: to get only top grades in every subject, to practice the piano intensively, and to excel in everything I did. Of course, I made mistakes; I stumbled along the way at times. But I always worked hard (that was normal in our family) and was good at math, literature, and foreign languages. Today, I'm glad for everything I learned back then, because it gave me a foundation of knowledge that would prove vital for the rest of my life.

Were there particular mentors or intellectual encounters that redirected your trajectory from performer to scholar?

I fondly remember my piano teacher from the last four years of my school days, Marta Paladi, who was a lady in the truest sense of the word.

With a subtle sense of humor and a broad cultural knowledge (she herself was the author of monographs on musicians), she didn't limit herself to piano lessons, but recommended concerts and readings to me and lent me recordings and books. I also had other teachers who sparked my love of reading, but I must admit that I ultimately ended up studying musicology more by chance (should I call it fate?): In 1985, I took the entrance exam for piano at the conservatory and narrowly missed the cutoff score. I decided not to repeat that experience, spent a year preparing for musicology, and that's how my path changed.

Growing up and studying in Bucharest during a complex historical period, how did that context shape your early understanding of music and its meaning?

I spent the first 23 years of my life under the communist regime. I had a grandfather (on my mother's side) who had once been a teacher; he had fought in World War II and had been imprisoned in a Soviet labor camp for five years. We were very close, and he always remained a staunch anti-communist and anti-Soviet who tried to explain the true history to me – not the one we were taught in school. I regret not having listened to him more.

As for our music training, as students we focused almost exclusively on the musical text and its analysis, paying little attention to the historical, aesthetic, and philosophical context. I believe it was a clever way for some professors to avoid, for example, telling us how “atheistic” Bach was; they omitted the stories surrounding the complex contrapuntal structures they taught because they couldn't tell us much about the deep religious spirit that shapes Bach's music. We all know that such things were forbidden in an atheistic society like the communist one.

As someone who began as a pianist and moved toward musicology, how did performance shape your analytical and theoretical thinking?

I am convinced that it is extremely beneficial for any music theorist to have direct, personal contact with music. My years of piano training, competitions, recitals, and concerts have taught me a great deal about music “from the inside out” and have also led me to be thoughtful and attentive when evaluating the performances of others. The question must also be asked in reverse: How have analysis and theory influenced my piano playing? They have undoubtedly helped me understand a score more quickly

and deeply, but I would say that performance and musicology, when practiced by the same person, must remain distinct, separate experiences. In other words, one should not play the piano like a musicologist...

How did your early exposure to international competitions influence your understanding of musical value and canon formation?

The two piano competitions (in Italy and Spain) and a summer course (in Weimar) that I took part in as a student before 1990 opened up extraordinary horizons for me: At the age of 15, I left Romania for the first time, listened to young people my own age, and realized that no unbridgeable gap separated us, as it had seemed to me from the perspective of a country drastically isolated from the outside world. I learned to navigate societies that were so different from my own (or so it seemed to me); I struggled to shake off my insecurities about my behavior, my appearance, or my clothing, as if I came from a country inferior to Western Europe. It is hard to explain such feelings today, but I feel them with the same intensity.

What does musicology allow you to understand about the world that no other discipline can?

For me, musicology was the perfect place where my two childhood passions – literature and music – came together.

Dr. Sandu-Dediu academic formation was further enriched by several prestigious fellowships and research programs. She studied in Austria with a scholarship from the Alban Berg Foundation and later continued her research at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. In Romania, she was affiliated with New Europe College through postdoctoral fellowships, an institution where she later became Rector of the Institute for Advanced Study.

What differences do you perceive between Romanian and Western European academic cultures in musicology?

Musicology is a young discipline worldwide, but in Romania it is even younger. Although journalists and music critics existed long before the 20th century, I believe that we owe the systematization and modernization of our discipline to Constantin Brăiloiu. As a leading ethnomusicologist who was well integrated into the Parisian scene during the interwar period and settled in Switzerland after World War II, Brăiloiu defined methods and provided models for (ethno-)musicological research. After 1947, Romanian musicology

– particularly historical musicology – was inevitably shaped by communist ideology, through the rewriting of history in general and music history in particular. Isolated from the rest of the world – less by language than by the harsh communist regime in Romania – some of the leading figures in historical musicology studied in the former USSR. Only a few managed to maintain contact with France (given the tradition of close Romanian-French relations), and even fewer turned to German models. The field that continued to develop was primarily that of systematic musicology (music theory, structural analysis, aesthetics), with composers who also devoted themselves to musicological work making a decisive contribution to this branch.

There is much more to say about the context of Romanian musicology: what is certain is that it focused heavily on the national musical heritage – which was somewhat natural – and could not keep pace with the new trends, ideas, and methodologies emerging around the world. It was only after 1990 that it began, tentatively, to make up for this lack of communication. Nowadays, with our younger generation being so well connected and having a command of the *lingua franca* (English, of course) that comes naturally to them, the boundaries have become considerably blurred.

Is there a specifically Eastern European perspective in musicology that differs from dominant Western paradigms?

I don't want to generalize, but I believe that it was precisely the political situation in Eastern Europe after World War II that shaped the distinct, strongly nationalist paths and mindsets in this region. In any case, there is clearly a greater interest here in folklore and other traditional music (religious, for instance).

Do you consider musicology today more interdisciplinary than in the past and if so, what are the risks and gains?

Yes, interdisciplinarity seems inevitable today, at least in theory. In practice, however, musicology has never been able to ignore developments in history and linguistics, the visual arts, or discoveries in mathematics, physics, astronomy, and so on. People also speak of multidisciplinary, transdisciplinarity... I consider dialogue with other disciplines to be fruitful and welcome it; however, the danger arises when one ventures beyond one's own field of expertise without possessing genuine expertise in another area.

Dr. Sandu-Dediu research activity focuses particularly on Romanian music after 1944, modernism and postmodernism in music, musical rhetoric and the cultural implications of musical discourse under different political

contexts. Her books and studies address a wide range of topics related to Romanian and European music culture. Among her notable volumes are "Romanian Music between 1944-2000" (2002), "New Music between Modern and Postmodern" (2004), "Choices, Affects, Attitudes. On Style and Rhetoric in Music" (2013) etc. She has also published numeral articles and studies in international journals and collective volumes in Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the United States, Serbia, Hungary and Poland, contributing to broader discussions concerning modernity, nationalism, ideology, and aesthetics in music.

Your work engages with 20th-century music, ideology and interpretation, how do you conceptualize the relationship between music and political context?

For us, Romanian musicologists trained under the communist regime, accustomed to separating the musical analysis of a composition from its contextual roots, this shift in perspective proved both necessary and difficult in the post-1990 era. While Romanian historiography had been inevitably and profoundly distorted by communism and nationalist ideology, one could find an (illusory) refuge before 1990 in structuralist analysis, in the dissection of the mechanisms of contemporary Romanian scores. But even there, viewed through the prism of the present, deeply ingrained musicological clichés emerge, such as "the tension between the national and the universal" or the "transfiguration" of the folk source in avant-garde composition. The 1990s and the opening of borders to the rest of the world sparked a reflection on the need to rediscover and reformulate Romanian musical histories.

To give a concrete example: when, after 2000, I began to examine more closely the link between music and ideology, I discovered an unexplored area of Romanian composition from the period 1938–1950, and questions arose regarding its similarities with other European music. Do these years, marked by the rise of nationalism, fascist and communist dictatorships, racism, and war, have a well-defined musical profile? Or can we only speak of setbacks relative to the innovations of the 1920s, the instrumentalization of music for political and propaganda purposes, and the retreat of leading artists into isolated niches?

What methodological tools do you find most effective when analyzing postwar Romanian music?

Consult as comprehensive a bibliography as possible, one that includes both the composers' theoretical writings and press articles that shed

light on how the works were received at their premieres; utilize archives – whether those of the Union of Composers and Musicologists of Romania and other institutions or those of the former Securitate; analyze the score while listening to the music; and finally, to the extent possible, conduct interviews with the composers and evaluate other “oral” sources (radio and television broadcasts).

In your view, how does music both reflect and resist ideological frameworks?

Music is a reflection of the era in which it is created; it is inevitably influenced by ideologies. Under totalitarian regimes, however, some composers manage to conceal messages of protest within their music. In any case, it is about people – about musicians – and how they engage with the world around them.

How should contemporary musicologists approach the legacy of music created under political regimes?

With great caution, neutrality, and objectivity (as far as possible), but also with empathy. One must try to understand the context and the reasons that led a musician to make artistic choices during totalitarian times, and to grasp their humanity.

How do you interpret the canonization of certain composers while others remain marginal?

Establishing a canon has always been – and still is today – a marketing strategy (even in times when different terms were used). Extremely talented composers with long-standing reputations are sometimes lumped together with less significant figures in the canon, while exceptional musicians receive little attention. Sometimes (as in the case of Romania), peripheral countries or regions are not taken into account when establishing the canon. It always depends on who is establishing it...

Can musicology still claim objectivity, or is it inevitably shaped by cultural positioning?

That is a very sensitive issue. Of course, I believe that musicology should remain objective. However, history has taught us that under totalitarian regimes that impose strict censorship, objectivity is compromised.

How should we rethink listening in the 21st century, in an era of digital saturation?

I feel that, alongside their active and adept use of digital technology, young people need to develop – or rediscover – the patience to listen, just as they do when reading books. We, the older generations, have also adapted to new technologies and to the appealing “packaging” of classical music, which is designed to attract audiences. We can continue to do this, but we must also remain aware of how much beauty, emotion, and sensitivity there is in listening to the music of Mozart or Chopin, Verdi or Prokofiev (I have chosen these examples at random). If young people are patient, benevolent, and willing not to let themselves get bored too quickly, they will quite simply discover worlds that comfort them, challenge them, sadden them, or cheer them up. After all, what is music other than a bundle of universal human emotions?

As a former prorector and now rector, how has administrative responsibility influenced your scholarly thinking?

I never wanted to be involved in administrative tasks. Nevertheless, I took on various responsibilities from which I learned a great deal. I would have liked to be able to pursue my own musicological and artistic projects without interruption, but I’ve learned that you can’t avoid bureaucratic hassles. It is difficult to collaborate with colleagues from a leadership position: I learned everything on the job, without any management training, and I found it best to handle most tasks myself rather than delegate them to others. However, one must be fortunate enough to have a supportive environment, and that is what I found at New Europe College. Here, the quality of the staff, the selected fellows, and the research projects carried out – all of this fosters excellence, good manners, and elegance in behavior. That is not my doing. I simply “inherited” the institution this way. I am constantly learning from my colleagues in the humanities and social sciences and applying these lessons, consciously or unconsciously, to my own research.

How do you negotiate the tension between academic leadership and sustained research productivity?

Working in a “polyphonic” way has always suited me. I like to switch between different activities, even though I often take on too many tasks and sometimes get bogged down (but I have only myself to blame!). In the end, I’m stubborn enough not to give up what I love doing most – musicological writing.

How has your experience as a woman shaped your academic and leadership trajectory?

Without necessarily being a feminist, my mother, who was a doctor, taught me that I had to stand on my own two feet in life and build my own career. I have to admit that I've never faced any difficulties – neither in my work as a musicologist nor in the leadership positions I've held – simply because of being a woman. Maybe I was just lucky...

Do you feel that the concept of “authority” in academia is still gendered?

When I look around at Romanian universities, I see very few female rectors. At New Europe College, as well as at the National University of Music in Bucharest, the leadership is predominantly female. But I think these are exceptions.

What challenges did you encounter in positions of leadership and how did you navigate them?

Oh, there were plenty of challenges. I remember when I was appointed vice-rector for quality assurance (I think that was in 2004): I had absolutely no idea what those terms even meant (quality assurance had only just been introduced in Romania). I looked at the major universities and adapted regulations and procedures for us; I learned as I went along. When I was then offered the position of rector at NEC, I honestly thought it was a joke. I accepted the offer recklessly, driven solely by my respect and admiration for the founders, Andrei Pleșu and Marina Hasnaș. Several extremely difficult years followed, during which Lelia Ciobotariu (executive director and my dear friend) and I were on the brink of financial ruin. The fact that we worked as a team and supported each other unreservedly saved us.

Do you see a distinct “female voice” in musicological discourse, or is this distinction problematic?

I think the distinction is indeed problematic. Perhaps a “feminine” voice would be easier to detect in composition, and perhaps here and there in performance as well, although such distinctions do not always hold up. Even less so in musicology, I think.

What advice would you give to young women pursuing careers in musicology today?

Let them choose the path they love, for then they will work with enthusiasm. Let them strive to distinguish themselves through their own qualities and ideas. Our victory – as women – would be complete if we achieved success not because of a quota for gender equality imposed “from above,” but through our own efforts.

What role does curiosity play in sustaining a lifelong scholarly vocation?

A leading role. Constant curiosity is essential. It is curiosity, after all, that drives you to continually adapt to new technologies, for example.

If you were to reimagine musicology for the next generation, what would you change?

I hope that future musicologists will give our voice greater weight and help it be heard more clearly in society. We are a small group, a niche. We know how important our profession is, but I want this to be recognized by the general public as well.

What do you see as the most urgent questions facing musicology today?

To survive in a world that is becoming less and less interested in culture in the traditional sense.

How can musicology remain relevant in a rapidly changing cultural landscape?

I don't know. Whoever finds the answer to this question will earn our eternal gratitude.

Looking ahead, what intellectual projects or themes continue to challenge and inspire you?

A book I finished about a year and a half ago, titled *Music in Nationalist Tones*, is due to be published soon. I will continue to explore this

vein of research on the connections between music and ideologies, but I will also step back from it, perhaps returning to an older interest of mine: theories of musical performance.

If you could address your younger self at the beginning of your journey, what essential insight would you offer?

I'd have a lot to say to my younger self, and I'd probably agree with my critical mother (with whom I often clashed). But I'm afraid it wouldn't do any good. I'd probably make the same mistakes.

What do you hope will remain both from your work and from your presence in the academic world?

For most of my life, I believed that the most valuable thing one can leave behind is a book (or books – written works, in any case). I think I got it from my grandfather, whom I've already mentioned. Now I'm not so sure about that anymore, and besides, musicology books are aimed at an extremely limited audience. But I believe I have succeeded in nurturing a new generation of exceptional musicologists. Of course, I cannot take all the credit for this, as we are talking about intelligent, well-educated young people who bring with them an interest in and openness to music research. Yet I feel that my efforts as a teacher were not in vain and that I have succeeded in giving our marginal discipline a new direction. I also hope to have left a small mark on the history of an extraordinary and far from typical institution like the New Europe College. I could never match the contribution of the founder, Andrei Pleșu – that was never my goal – but it wasn't easy to carry on his good ideas and develop new ones for us (the entire NEC team) that keep pace with the times.

In a time of rapid cultural change, what gives you confidence in the future of music and musicology?

History teaches us that the times change in waves. There has always been a fear of the new and a fear that the old might disappear. Music (I am referring here primarily to what is generally called “classical music”) and musicology will survive, albeit perhaps in forms different from those we have known so far. I don't know how; I'm not good at making predictions.

And finally, if we imagine music not as an object of study but as a companion in life what has it taught you, at the deepest level?

Listening to one another and playing together, just like in a chamber music ensemble.

The interview was conducted by
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