

ETA BOERIU BETWEEN THE MUSIC OF POETRY AND POETRY OF MUSIC. TRANSLATION, INTERMEDIALITY, AND MELOPHRASIS

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SUMMARY. This article explores an often-overlooked aspect of Eta Boeriu's intellectual and artistic profile, namely the relationship between poetry, music, and translation in her work. Although her work as a translator of Italian literature, particularly Dante's works, has been widely recognized, her longstanding connection to the musical milieu of the "Gheorghe Dima" Conservatory and the influence of music on her poetic sensibility have received little attention from scholars. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that integrates concepts like cultural agency, medial transfer, melophrasis, the study explores three aspects of her work. First, it analyzes her role as a cultural mediator between Italian and Romanian culture through translation; second, it discusses her interpretation of Dante's "Divine Comedy" from the perspective of the poetry of sounds, highlighting the acoustic dimension of Dante's poetic imagination. Finally, the study explores the intermedial dialogue between poetry and music in the author's own poetic work, particularly in the poem "*Piesă de Alban Berg*" (*Piece by Alban Berg*) inspired by the composer's music.²

Keywords: Eta Boeriu, Dante, translation, cultural transfer, melophrasis.

Prolegomena

In the collective consciousness, the name Eta Boeriu is synonymous with the Italian culture. As Professor Ștefan Damian noted, "(...) no other Romanian author has woven their name so closely and harmoniously with

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² This article is an expanded version of a paper presented on 7 March 2024 at the International Museum and Library of Music in Bologna, within the event "Una voce in bilico. Omaggio a Eta Boeriu," organized on the occasion of International Women's Day, together with Ioana Badiu, Christophe Alvarez, and Georgiana Fodor, in partnership with the cultural association *Athena Musica*.



the very destiny of these relations (i.e., Romanian-Italian) and with that of some of the most important authors; and perhaps none has created themselves as an author by creating and recreating those in another culture.”³

Her work as an Italianist and poet is well known. Much less explored has been her work as a professor at the Gheorghe Dima National Academy of Music, her relationship with the musical environment and its artists, as well as the impact that music had on her sensibility and creation. Therefore, in this article, we aim to shed light on some of these aspects through testimonies, reconstructions, and analysis with an interdisciplinary openness. Concepts such as *cultural agency*, *medial transfer* and *melophrasis* will be treated in an integrative approach. The paper is also intended to be a *restitutio in honorem*, which we hope will serve as a pendant to existing writings.

Margarita Caranica—this is her real name—was born in 1923 “in Transylvania, a land of rigorous studies and moral integrity,” as the poet Adrian Popescu writes.⁴ She came from a family of Aromanians, great intellectuals: her father, Ioan Caranica, was an important musician, while her brother, Nicu Caranica, was a poet and university professor, assistant to Ramiro Ortiz at the University of Padua. This intellectual environment, in which music and literature coexisted naturally, undoubtedly contributed to the formation of a certain sensibility for both poetic language and musical expression.

Eta Boeriu studied in Cluj and Sibiu, where the university had been transferred during the war. Her professional career was not easy: she worked as a teacher, librarian and then as an assistant in the Italian department of the University.

In 1956, she took up her university career again with a teaching position in Italian at the Gheorghe Dima Conservatory in Cluj-Napoca, where she taught until 1978.⁵

Eta Boeriu was, in a sense, an aristocrat of the spirit. Her contemporaries belonged to the same intellectual and spiritual elite, including the writers of the famous „Sibiu Circle” (Ion Negoitescu, Cornel Regman, Radu Stanca) deeply attached to the “virtues of the Word,” to quote the great Romanian poet Ștefan Augustin Doinaș.⁶ This environment also fostered an awareness of the expressive power of the word, an aspect that would later resonate with her reflections on the sonorous dimension of the poetry.

³ Damian, Ștefan. “Eta Boeriu și literatura italiană” (“Eta Boeriu and Italian Literature”). In *Steaua*, 49, 2–3, 1998, p. 57.

⁴ Popescu, Adrian. „Amintindu-ne de Eta Boeriu” („Remembering Eta Boeriu”). In *Steaua*, 44, 2, 1993, p. 25.

⁵ Papahagi, Marian, „Fragmente pentru un portret indirect” (“Fragments for an Indirect Portrait”). In *Transilvania*, 91, 1, 1985, p. 36.

⁶ Doinaș, Ștefan Augustin, „Imposibila despărțire” (The Impossible Separation). In *România literară*, 17, 48, 1984, p. 10.

Eta Boeriu: la Signora delle Tre Corone

If we were to define and highlight Boeriu's highlight contribution, it would undoubtedly be that of translator. Eta Boeriu brought classical and modern Italian literature to Romanian readers. Her body of translations begins with the great poetry of the *Trecento* and spans authors from the 20th century. Thanks to her, poets such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Michelangelo, and Baldassar Castiglione came to life in Romanian, and their fundamental works, such as *Il Canzoniere* and *Decameron*, acquired a profound Romanian expression.

Italian prose, from Giovanni Verga to Cesare Pavese and Alberto Moravia, has also been rendered "in a pure, flavorful, and nuanced language," to quote Adrian Popescu.⁷

Eta Boeriu's main work as a translator remains the Divine Comedy, "her first artistic victory, which crowned her as a young queen," as Ștefan Augustin Doinaș writes.⁸ Dante's comedy that "became divine again in Romanian through her efforts," retransposing it "with the consciousness of the beginning of the world."⁹ In harmonious rivalry with illustrious predecessors, she offered a masterful Romanian version of the masterpiece, demonstrating also the full capacity of our language to become an instrument of universal poetry. Ștefan Augustin Doinaș wonderfully emphasizes that Eta Boeriu's version represents "a true miracle of our language, which now speaks to us familiarly of the shocking thresholds crossed by the great Florentine, and which is on our table every day, like bread and wine."¹⁰ Such translation becomes an act of nourishment for the soul, a constant in spiritual life, keeping alive our connection with the universal values expressed through Dante's masterpiece.

One can easily imagine how difficult it can be to translate Dante: his literary score in tercets of hendecasyllables is extraordinarily complex. In one of his articles, Eta Boeriu reveals some of the secrets of translating Dante's work: "Rhymes must always be in keeping with the style of the work and bear the imprint of the author's personality, because otherwise, however successful they may be, they end up disturbing the text and, as they accumulate, form an entity in their own right, a second personality, which no longer breathes in the shadow of the poet but claims the right to a life of its own alongside him. This is the danger that arises when a great poet translates another great

⁷ Popescu, Adrian. „Amintindu-ne de Eta Boeriu” (Remembering Eta Boeriu). In *Steaua*, 44, 2, 1993, p. 25.

⁸ Doinaș, Ștefan Augustin, „Imposibila despărțire” (The Impossible Separation). In *România literară*, 17, 48, 1984, p. 10.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

poet, and even more so in a work of the magnitude of the Divine Comedy.”¹¹ The complexity of Dante’s poetic architecture required of the translator not only philological precision but also a deep sensitivity to the acoustic dimension of poetic language.

It is, therefore, an immense task, requiring meticulous precision, competence, imagination, creativity, but also rigor, and once again confirming not only Eta Boeriu’s qualities and erudition, but also the fundamental role of translators as intercultural mediators and agents of cultural transfer. How important a talented translator is in creating a deep bond between two countries, how much Eta Boeriu has united Italy and Romania!

Translators are true builders of spiritual bridges; they are ambassadors who bring to light not only the essence of a language, but also the sensibility of a people, creating connections between cultures. Translation can therefore be understood as an art of bringing cultures closer together and uniting them, as suggested by the very title of the article *„Building Bridges Between Cultural Studies and Translation Studies”*.¹² This perspective is further developed through the ideas of the writer Castro Paniagua, who argues that “a translator should be an ethnographer.”¹³ In his view the translator’s responsibility goes beyond the accurate rendering of semantic meaning; it also involves interpreting the cultural codes embedded within the text.¹⁴ In this sense, Eta Boeriu had the merit of acting as a cultural mediator and agent of cultural transfer, not only by rendering the linguistic meaning of Italian works, but also by conveying their cultural and spiritual depth to Romanian readers.

Italy has recognized the value of Eta Boeriu through awards of the highest prestige. In 1970, the poet received the Gold Medal of the City of Florence and the Florentine Union, one of the most prestigious distinctions granted to personalities who have made an outstanding contribution to culture. In 1974, she was awarded the City of Monselice Prize and the Gold Medal of the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice. The most important recognition, however, was the title of Officer of the Merit of the Italian Republic, conferred in 1979 for her contribution to the promotion of Italian culture.¹⁵

¹¹ Boeriu, Eta. “Traducând *Divina Comedie*” (Translating the Divine Comedy) in *Steaua*, 16, 5, 1965, pp. 132–136, p. 136.

¹² Martínez-Sierra, Juan José. “Building Bridges Between Cultural Studies and Translation Studies: With Reference to the Audiovisual Field.” In *Journal of Language & Translation*, 11, 1, 2010, pp. 115–136, pp. 120–121.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Papahagi, Marian, „Fragmente pentru un portret indirect” („Fragments for an Indirect Portrait”). In *Transilvania*, year 91, no. 1, 1985, p. 36.

The Poetry of Sound in Dante

In the article “The Poetry of Sounds in the Divine Comedy,”¹⁶ published posthumously in 1984, Eta Boeriu highlights the sonorous dimension of Dante’s poetry, not only in terms of cadence, internal rhythm, or euphonic qualities, but also in terms of the conceptual aspects within the great literary work, or, as the author puts it, “the sound itself, music itself, and the way it is reflected in the Divine Comedy.” A revelatory approach, which builds upon the author’s interests, her teaching work at Conservatory, her interdisciplinary outlook, and her aesthetic understanding.

In her approach, the Divine Comedy is the first literary work in which music is evoked, Dante being an author deeply familiar with the world of music—an aspect explained through the lens of his scholastic education (music was part of the quadrivium, along with arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy).

In the *Convivio*, Dante defines music as the art of beautiful relationships. Eta Boeriu highlights how Dante understands this and introduces into his poem a true cartography of sound—songs, choruses, instruments, and acoustic images that enhance and amplify the symbolic dimension of the text. Eta Boeriu’s reading thus highlights Dante’s acoustic sensibility, the way in which the sonic universe contributes to the evocative power of poetic language. It is a unique approach within the context of Romanian research of that time dedicated to Dante’s work, Eta Boeriu’s study stands out for its focus on the sound dimension of the poetic imagination and on the auditory universe of the poem—an aspect that has been little explored in traditional literary exegesis.

The Musicality of Poetry: Melophrasis and Medial Transfer

Eta Boeriu was also an extraordinary poet, a lesser-known facet of her personality, hidden in the shadow of her work as a translator. Although her poetic activity took shape in her mature years, Eta Boeriu wrote several volumes of dense, saturated, hermetic verses that reveal a particular expressive concentration. As the poet and publicist Alexandru Căprariu states: “An exceptional poet herself, Eta Boeriu’s song resembles her: subtle, without any fuss that might disturb the soul, profound, nostalgic, like a sigh

¹⁶ Boeriu, Eta. “Poezia sunetelor în *Divina Comedie*.” *Lucrări de muzicologie*, 16, 1980, pp. 33-38.

coming from the secret life of the heart, from a lost Eden that only the purest poetry can sometimes find a way to reach without deception.”¹⁷

Some of these poems were influenced by the musical life in which he moved, and I would like to focus on one in particular, which I learned about from pianist Ninuca Oșanu Pop, *Piesă de Alban Berg*, composed under the impression of listening to the work during a recital. I quote her testimony, which also reveals how “new” music was perceived at that time: “During that period, themed evenings were organized at the University Club, led by writer Romulus Guga. The theme of the evening on January 14, 1966, was “Expressionism.” Lecturer Ligia Zoicaș¹⁸ provided well-documented explanations about this musical movement, followed by works by composers who adhered to this musical style (which was new to us in 1966!). Together with clarinetist Ioan Goilă, I performed Alban Berg’s “Four Pieces.” After a while, I received from the poet the volume „Ce vânăț crâng” (What a Blue Grove), which included the poem *Piesă de Alban Berg*,” composed under the impression of that music while she listened to us.”¹⁹

Creating under the influence of an artistic stimulus—a process traditionally known to the Greeks as *ekphrasis*—involves transposing the expressive qualities of one artwork into another medium, such as literature²⁰. Creating under the influence of music it is called *melophrasis*, „a linguistic paraphrase of music, elaborated in such a way as to rival in expressive force the very being described.”²¹ In this poem, Alban Berg’s music inspires a lyrical response that reflects structures, rhythms, and emotions specific to his music: dissonant, essentialized, sharp, incisive, lapidary, aphoristic. This is what cultural studies specialists call medial transfer²² or intermedial

¹⁷ Căprariu, Alexandru. “Eta Boeriu.” In *Steaua*, 35, 11, 1984, p. 7.

¹⁸ An internationally renowned musicologist, Ligia Toma Zoicaș (1931-2016) was part of the elite of the Sigismund Toduță music school in Cluj. She was a professor of music history, music theory, music teaching methodology, and score reading at the Cluj Conservatory (1958-1990), published studies, articles, essays, and reviews, and gave specialized conferences, lectures, and radio broadcasts.

¹⁹ Pascu, Cristina. *Ninuca Oșanu Pop. Viața, un mozaic multisonor. Memorii în dialog (Ninuca Oșanu Pop. Life, a Multisonorous Mosaic. Memories in Dialogue)*. Ed. MediaMusica, Cluj-Napoca, 2024, p. 45.

²⁰ James A. W. Heffernan. “Ekphrasis and Representation.” *New Literary History*, 22, 2, 1991, pp. 297–316. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/469040>. Accessed 11 Mar. 2026.

²¹ Francesco Finocchiaro, Paolo Gozza, and Stefano Lombardi Vallauri, eds., *Il discorso musicale. La musica e i suoi generi testuali nella storia*. Torino: Accademia University Press, 2023, p. 7.

²² O. Rajewsky, Irina. “Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality,” In *Intermedialités / Intermediality*, no. 6, Fall 2005, pp. 43–64, p. 51.

transposition²³—a deep essence, a basic content, transferred from one art form to another. This poem offers a remarkable example of intermedial dialogue, illustrating how musical experience could be transformed into poetic expression:

*Noianuri cu țipăt alămii resupt,
De sonuri hiperbolă suplă și geamăt
Abia cutezat, prelung întrerupt
Spre noua gestație acută de freamăt
În spații subțiri curînd retractil,
Diformă de sunet narație sfioasă,
Și tot mai adînc vibratil
La ceas de pământ reculegere joasă.*²⁴

The title itself announces a symbolic equivalence, foreshadowing the idea that the poem itself becomes a piece of music. Although Doina Rad, Eta Boeriu's main biographer, places this poem among the "less successful" texts in the volume, describing it as a "lyrical exercise" (a debatable assessment, of course), she nevertheless captures its musical-aesthetic dimension, characterizing it as a "euphonious arborescent" poem.²⁵ In other words, the sonic qualities of the words themselves generate a form of musicality—through rhythm, repetition, and timbral resonance—but also the semantic meaning. From this perspective, the poem not only evokes Alban Berg's music, but also attempts to translate certain structural and expressive qualities of music into poetic discourse. The text incorporates words with strong auditory connotations—*scream*, *brass*, *sounds*, *moan*—which construct an increasingly dominant acoustic imagery.

²³ Wolf, Werner. "Relations between Literature and Music in the Context of a General Typology of Intermediality," In *Comparative Literature: Sharing Knowledges for Preserving Cultural Diversity*, vol. 1, Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems (EOLSS), p. 7.

²⁴ Boeriu, Eta. *Ce vîntă crîng* (*What a Bluish Grove*). Ed. Dacia, Cluj, 1971, p. 145.

*Waves of the brass's muffled shriek,
Of sounds—a supple hyperbole and a moan
Barely dared, prolonged and interrupted
Toward the new acute gestation of a stir
In thin spaces soon to retract,
A sound-deformed, timid narrative,
And ever more deeply vibrating
At the hour of the earth, low contemplation.*

²⁵ Rad, Doina. *Eta Boeriu*. Ed. Limes, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, p. 145.

Eta Boeriu as professor

Eta Boeriu taught at the Academy of Music from 1956 to 1978, with a five-year break between 1958 and 1963. Her teaching activity at the Conservatory represents another dimension of this cultural mediation, as she transmitted Italian culture within a musical environment, thus creating a dialogue between literature and music.

She was the Italian teacher of the famous soprano Mariana Nicolesco, the renowned traditional music performer Ioan Bocsa, the conductor Cornel Groza, the current rector, cellist Vasile Jucan, and many other great Romanian musicians.

Ioan Bocsa, renowned ethnomusicologist and university professor, told me the following about Eta Boeriu: "I studied Italian with her for two years. She was a distinguished presence, with a unique beauty and a lively sparkle in her eyes. She had an intelligence that challenged you even in casual conversation, let alone in class. Eta Boeriu was more than just a teacher; she was a true mentor, an elite translator, and for her teaching was a way of opening new horizons for her students."²⁶

This testimony reveals the portrait of the ideal teacher, who conveys not only information but also emotions, who offers not only something to think about but also something to experience. The teacher accompanied the informative content with that much-needed emotional aura. Teachers who accompany the informative content with that much-needed emotional aura.

Epilogue

Unfortunately, November 13, 1984, also marks her departure from this world. The great pianist Ninuca Oșanu Pop recalls those moments:

"The tragic event occurred while I was serving as rector, and I took care of organizing the funeral, which I wanted to be solemn. With pain in my heart, I remember the obstacles encountered on the part of the higher authorities, who, despite all my insistence, did not approve the display in the foyer of the University House, allowing it only at the cemetery, due to the arrival of her granddaughter, Michaela Caranica Fulea, who had fled to the West. Many people and many flowers filled the square of the Central Cemetery. Among them were citizens and personalities from all over the country, including the writer Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, whose moving words gave a regal aura to the whole ceremony. At the end, I heard cannon shots, the meaning of

²⁶ Ioan Bocșa, interview with the author, 25 October 2024.

which I only understood later: as a Knight of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic, an honor she received in 1979 for her entire career, she was entitled to military honors. With bitterness, we must note, as so many times before, that Romanian values were more appreciated abroad than in their own country!"²⁷

The words of Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, published in the magazine *România Literară*, reflect in their title the void left by Eta Boeriu: *The unbearable separation*.²⁸

However, Eta Boeriu continues to live on through the cultural legacy she left us, that of connecting Cluj to the great Italian culture. Thanks to her, today we can claim a noble filiation, which we celebrate and honor through our constant openness to Italian cultural values and through the lively relations we maintain with Italy.

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²⁷ Pascu, Cristina. *Ninuca Oșanu Pop. Viața, un mozaic multisonor. Memorii în dialog (Ninuca Oșanu Pop. Life, a Multisong Mosaic. Memories in Dialogue)*. Ed. MediaMusica, Cluj-Napoca, 2024, p. 46.

²⁸ Doinaș, Ștefan Augustin, "Imposibila despărțire" (*The Impossible Separation*). *România literară*, nr. 48, 1984, p. 10.

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