

## THE MUSICAL PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS IN THE LYRICAL GENRE

LUMINIȚA STOIAN<sup>1</sup>

**SUMMARY.** This study aims to highlight the methods of musical expressiveness used by the composer Teodor Zgureanu when portraying the characters in his opera, "Decebalus". He depicts his characters by resorting to a certain vocal method. Mainly, each of the characters has their own, reserved space. Hence, each of them is offered, at least, one solo number (an aria or monologue). Zgureanu tries to find the most efficient formulas for establishing, in terms of sound, the dialectic of moods and personality of the characters.

**Keywords:** Teodor Zgureanu, Decebal, Bessarabian opera, musical portrayal, lyrical genre.

The Opera "*Decebalus*", an opera in three acts, with a libretto by Victor Teleucă, is composer Zgureanu's very first work intended for lyrical theatre and his first creation of wider amplitude, in terms of both orchestral apparatus and number of performers. He wrote this work with an ardent devotion, filtering it through the strainer of his own sensitiveness. The score is built around the idea of choosing the supreme sacrifice for the defence of liberty and justice. This work reveals Zgureanu's conception and technique which, both, have the ability of turning elements of ancient melos into a voice of universal resonance.

The opera has the following configuration:

### Act I

- Overture "*DACIA*";
- The Coronation of Decebalus;
- The oath of the soldiers;

---

<sup>1</sup> Assoc.Prof., PhD – Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Department of Social and Human Sciences, Spiru Haret University, Bucharest, Romania  
E-mail: [luminitagutanu@yahoo.es](mailto:luminitagutanu@yahoo.es)

LUMINIȚA STOIAN

- Zamolxis's monologue;
- The Queen's Aria;
- The Quartet: Decebalus, the Queen, the daughter and the son.

**Act II**

- Introduction;
- The Old Dokia and the shepherds;
- The Nocturnal;
- Armin's song;
- The Aria of Ninvana;
- The Duet between Armin and Ninvana; The Marriage Ceremony;
- The Ballet.

**Act III**

- Priest Vezina and the body of soldiers;
- The Monologue of Decebalus's son;
- The Aria of Decebalus;
- The Dialogue between Trajan and Decebalus;
- *Lamento. Dona eis Requiem*;
- The Monologue of Decebalus "in front of" History;
- The ending: Hymn to the Dacian Land.

The subject of the opera refers to a historical page from our people's tormented past. The action takes place in *Sarmisegetusa*, the capital of Dacia between 86-106 AD:

The subject represents a way of reconsidering the Dacian past, the past of our country and of our people.

The list of characters in this opera is numerically dominated by the male characters. Here are the soloists:

Decebalus – the King of the Dacians – bass;  
The Queen – mezzo-soprano;  
Duras-Diurpaneus – Decebalus's predecessor – tenor;  
Zamolxis – The Supreme God of the Dacians – bass;  
Vezina – a priest in Decebalus's army – baritone;  
Decebalus's son – tenor;  
Ninvana – Decebalus's daughter – soprano;  
Armin-aed – Ninvana's fiancé – lyrical tenor;  
Dokia – Decebalus's illegitimate daughter, the shepherdess – contralto;  
Trajan – the Roman emperor – baritone.

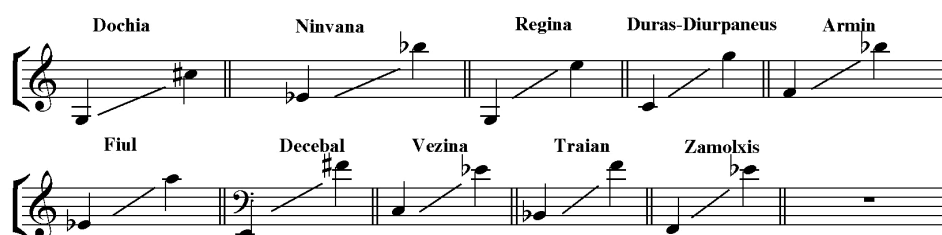
## THE MUSICAL PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS IN THE LYRICAL GENRE

The composer portrays his characters by resorting to a certain vocal method. Mainly, each of them has their own, reserved space. Hence, each of them is offered, at least, one solo number (an aria or monologue). Zgureanu tries to find the most efficient formulas for establishing, in terms of sound, the dialectic of moods and personality of the characters. He tries to capture the essence of each character, without deviating from the line of action. Similarly, he tries to correlate a character's mood with the description of a given situation, because that particular character describes himself or herself, through that situation. The melodic line of each soloist fragment is doubled in the orchestra and this technique helps at its delineation. These soloist numbers illustrate a proper climate for the action, thanks to the usage of all the musical parameters. Most of them are infused with folk-rooted intonations.

The melodic is based on consonant and dissonant relations, ascending and descending, stated through musical leaps or changed into arpeggios. The frequent leaps denote a melodic conception with a certain specific of instrumental origin. One can notice here a preference for expressing each interval in itself. The intervallic is in accordance with the affective expression, it imposes intervallic entities of chromatic origin in which folk-rooted motifs emerge, conferring them freshness and authenticity.

The soloist numbers do not contain persistent melodic on the extreme vocal ranges. Here is the vocal range of the characters:

### E.g. 1



Each soloist number is preceded by an instrumental introduction, which does not rely on a certain material of its succeeding *solo*, but it has the function of suggesting a certain climate or of logically explaining the placement of the character within a given context of the action.

The use of alternative measures and tempos seems to be given a special importance and they come along with the corresponding melodic. Zgureanu also uses a large range of dynamic markings. Hence, the

typology of contrasting dynamic markings is in no way unknown to him, as they are present in both the arias (as a technique of emphasizing the characters' personality), as well as in ensembles, (duets, quartets), thus offering genuine dynamic variations, following a conflictual, lyrical ascent, or some final sound peaks.

**Decebalus.** In the musical and dramatic development of Teodor Zgureanu's opera, we have the opportunity to witness the complex dialectic of situations encountered by the main character – *Decebalus* – the last king of the Dacians. His vocal score is the widest of the entire opera. The musical portrayal is attained cumulatively. The portrait of the Dacian ruler is profound, convincing, just as he is depicted on Trajan's Column in Rome: "...a pretty tall man, well-built and vigorous. His face, with a tall forehead, prominent brow ridges and thick eyebrows, with a strong, straight nose, prominent cheekbones and a hollow-cheeked face, with a short beard and a straight mouth, marked by a long moustache – all these facial traits reveal energy, harshness and bravery."<sup>2</sup> His face shows dignity and great presence. It is depicted through three main moments:

*the coronation* (the oath);  
*the conflict* (between Decebalus and Trajan);  
*the sacrifice* (the suicide).

The Aria from Act I (*By this sword, I swear...*) can be divided into two parts. The first one has a heroic tinge and it is written incisive tempo (*Marziale. Molto sostenuto*), in contrast with the second one (*Molto cantabile*), which is enriched with the sensitive tinging of the vocal contrasts. Decebalus's portrait takes shape here, for the first time – a vigorous leader, bold, agile, unflinching, determined, lucid, tenacious and, above all, a true patriot to his country and people, for whom he fought until his last breath.

Similarly, the Aria of Decebalus from Act III (*O, my beloved country...*) contains two sections. Section I (*Moderato maestoso. Molto cantabile*) is a page of meditation, of incantation and calmness. Section II (*Allegro sostenuto. Tumultoso. Feroce*) is a dispute with Zamolxis, a page full of torment: „Zamolxis, you are silent? Why are you silent? Or are your Dacians no longer Dacian, I wonder...” This is what Decebalus is thinking, as he is searching for an answer, his ideas, premonitions and doubts that start to build up. All this sound paste eventually converges towards the ending (*Molto maestoso*) in which Decebalus, once again, manifests his

---

<sup>2</sup> Daicoviciu Hadrian, *Portrete dacice*. Ed. Militară, București, 1984

exceptional qualities of a captain and diplomat and his main feature – his unwavering faith in his people and in its capacity to withstand:

*All that remains is to die for our beloved country,  
to die standing up, with the sword in our hand.*

In this aria, the palette of Decebalus's vocal expression is much richer than in the first-act aria. The melodic is broken, subjected to the capriciousness of rhythm, it alternates the measures (2/4, 4/4, 12/8, 3/4, 2/4, 3/8, 2/4) in search of the coloristic effect of each word's accents or vocal combinations; the *spoken voice* technique is also used. The type of writing here is that of elucidating the text through the means of melodic declamation. The composer suggests each theatrical detail through music: the confusion that had arisen, the mutiny, through an impetuous, surging and thundery vocal type.

*The dialogue between Decebalus and Trajan* renders a conflictual ascent. In terms of tempo, it is a precipitated dialogue (*Andante. Feroce*), expressing an explosion, very rhythmic, presented with an alternating metrics (3/4, 4/4, 3/4; 4/4, 3/4, 2/4) and developing in the *F Phrygian mode* (with tints of a major mode, through an ascended A, from *A flat* to *A natural*, towards F major). In this dialogue, the tragic ending begins to take shape. The scene is very tense, with a gloomy expression and tragic connotations. Here, the chords with added seconds prevail, revealing an accentuated state of nervousness. In their dialogue, there is an alternation between tension and resolution, a continuous oscillation between defeat and victory. We can find here dialogue formulas with a contrasting, increasingly dramatic contour, which signify the beginning of the conflict. The inner turmoil of the two characters is translated into music through a continuous amplification of the orchestral apparatus and through the presence of various means of expression in the vocal scores: the chromatic *glissando*, *staccato*, accentuated pitches, the presence of *spoken voice*, the change of tempo. The confrontation between the two ends with Decebalus's line: "*Murdered, but not defeated!*"

„Through his heroic gesture, as Hadrian Daicoviciu says, he may have made a one last service to his people. A prisoner king, humiliated and slain in Rome, would have nurtured the Dacians' hatred towards the people that had conquered their country; a king that chose to abandon life willingly left the door for reconciliation and understanding open.“<sup>3</sup>

The musical and temporal developments of each character have depended on the composer's strict aesthetic vision. The author lays the

<sup>3</sup> Daicoviciu Hadrian, *Portrete dacice*. Ed. Militară, București, 1984

emphasis on the main character – *Decebalus*, there is a “cantus planus” around which the composer gradually brings “counterpoints”, thus creating that “*multicolored web*” of characters.

There occurs a process of encompassing the soloistic trajectory (of each character) into the dramatic axis: *Decebalus* – the Dacian fate, all filtered through three key moments: coronation (+ *the rule of Decebalus*); *the imminent conflict*; *sacrifice*. Each key moment involves a certain group of characters:

- coronation: *Decebalus* + *Duras-Diurpaneus*, *Zamolxis*, *the Queen*, *Decebalus's son*, *Armin*, *Ninvana*, *Dokia*.
- Imminent conflict: *Decebalus* + *Priest Vezina*, *Decebalus's son*, *Trajan*.
- sacrifice: *Decebalus*.

We can notice here Zgureanu's aesthetic preference in organizing the cast and evolution of each character's discourse in correlation with the main hero (*Decebalus*). Hence, we can identify two types of planes or correlations (between the characters and *Decebalus*):

- *Plane X* – a direct correlation;
- *Plane Y* – an indirect correlation.

The direct correlation encompasses the active dramaturgic sphere (the portrayal of characters in connection with the dramatic axis), the indirect correlation – the passive sphere: *expository* (the portrayal of characters from the perspective of their coexistence with *Decebalus*). Let us notice, here, the overlapping of the two planes (correlations). The result of this juxtaposition is an affective complex, of polyphonic type.

Given the two spheres, *active* and *passive*, we can deduce the presence of two types of characters in this opera:

- *catalyzing* characters
- *expository* characters.

The characters' portrayal development shall be also influenced by the presence of the “merging” process (between characters); hence, we can note various correspondences, such as:

*Decebalus* → *the Queen*  
*Decebalus* → *the Queen* → *Decebalus's son* → *Ninvana*  
*Decebalus* → *Trajan*  
*Ninvana* → *Armin*, etc.

These relations emerge in correlation with the development of the dramatic tension. From the examples mentioned above, we can conclude that, largely, *the merger* occurs in correlation with the main character, the so-called "*cantus planus*".

The personality of each character manifests itself at the dramatic level, and implicitly, at the emotional one.

**Priest Vezina** (*a catalysing character, plane X – direct correlation*) is intended to reveal the will of the god Zamolxis. Acting as an intermediary, the composer provides this character with only one aria throughout the entire opera, which is seconded by the choir. The entire scene is structured according to the antiphonal principle, on the dialogue between the soldiers and the Priest. The entire vocal speech develops dramatically (going towards  $F_m \rightarrow F$  Phrygian), thus setting the ground for the tenser atmosphere, afterwards. This is evident ever since the incipit of his soloistic performance, which is preceded by tumultuous orchestral interventions in *glissando*, accompanied by "thunders" and "lightning" (as the author states. Actually, his suggestions are a natural part of the aesthetic message that characterizes the end of the millennium). As regards the vocal approach to this fragment, we can notice the presence of consonant and dissonant interval leaps. Another thing to notice is the frequent presence of the gradual progression of seconds, preceded by a leap of of sixth or seventh.

**The Queen** (*an expository character, plane X+Y – mixed correlations*). Her vocal score comprises sonorities which are typical for a heroine - a somewhat more peaceful and calmer music, with scarce chromatic intervals. The duet between Decebalus and the Queen is a musical development that starts off with dialogue and ends in unison, being presented in an incisive, syncopated rhythm, with an alternative metrics – 2/4, 6/8, 2/4, 6/8, 3/4, 6/8). Through this duet, Zgureanu creates the Queen's psychological profile (on one hand, a profound inner lyricism and wisdom; on the other hand, her score reveals some dramatic inflections).

This character is outlined very laconically, through a few features: sobriety, lyricism, fulfilment, sacrifice and profoundness. Her melodic line (the aria) comes either with a type of progression "in leaps", "in steps" or with an undulating one. The diversity in the vocal score is imprinted by the *rhythm*, capricious and in a permanent movement, in which the use of triplets gives it a *quasi-rubato* tinge. We can also notice the presence of the *oscillating metrics* (4/4  $\rightarrow$  3/4) and, last but not least, the alternation between gradual progression and some various, consonant or dissonant intervalic leaps. Let us take note of the presence of three dissonant

intervalic leaps, meant to highlight the following lexical units: “*focul*” (translation: *the fire*) (diminished fifth), “*cuprinse*” (translation: *comprised*) (augmented fifth), “*veșnic*” (translation: *eternally*) (augmented fourth), contained by the following syntagmas:

- “*Păzind necuprinsul și focul din vatră;*
- *Multe mame cuprinse în una;*
- *Veșnica mamă ce veșnic ne-nvață.*”

(Translation:

- *Guarding the infinite and the fire from the fireplace;*
- *The many mothers comprised into one;*
- *The eternal mother that teaches us eternally.)*

The musical development is focused on three main tonal pillars:

*D major* → *E major* → *D major*, ending with the full *dominant* of key *D major*.

**Duras - Diurpaneus** (*a catalyzing character, plane X – direct correlation*) stands out as a genuine state leader, who dignifiedly renounces the throne, in favor of Decebalus. This character stands out through his noble nature. His aria reveals a heroic, festive tone, whilst the melodic line is pretty somber, with an obvious instrumental tinge. The intervallic analysis signals the frequent presence of leaps of 4<sup>th</sup> (perfect or diminished), fifth and seventh. His aria consists of two distinct parts (the *binary* form) and it takes on the following tonal trajectory: it starts off on the tonic of the key *A flat major* (section A), then it moves into *B flat minor* with modulation into *F major* (section B), ending in *C major* (the *dominant* of *F major*).

**Decebalus's son** (*a catalyzing character, plane Y – indirect correlation*)

This character does not enjoy an extended vocal score, despite his role as the Dacians' messenger to their Supreme God, Zamolxis. His monologue stands out through nobleness and dramatic nature:

„*Still, luck has fallen my way...  
It is blissful to be born and die here, in Sarmisegetusa...*“

In fact, the term “monologue” is somewhat inappropriate for this musical fragment, as it does not comply with the classical meaning of the word. The notion refers to the presence of only one character in the scene, whereas, in this monologue, we have soldiers present, who not only make comments, but also engage in some dialogue with Decebalus's son. Consequently, the term “*monologue*” could be replaced by “*dialogue*”. From



the musical standpoint, we can notice a modal expression. Here we find the musical mode *F Phrygian*, which unnoticeably goes into a major mode (*F major* through *A natural*), also with *harmonic* tinges (*the harmonic minor* – ascended 7<sup>th</sup> – *E natural*).

The intervallic analysis indicates either a gradual or an "in leaps" development of the melodic trajectory. We can notice here the presence of five intervallic leaps of diminished fifth, which highlight some defining lexical units in the text, such as:

*cel ca voi;*  
*nu știm calea;*  
*la Sarmisegetuza;*  
*Nu se stinge;*  
*murind ori.*

(Translation:  
*a man of your kind;*  
*we don't know the way;*  
*in Sarmisegetusa;*  
*He does not die;*  
*Dying.*)

In this soloistic trajectory, we can find also a metric oscillation (3/4→4/4) which, in the last two interventions of the soloist and choir, ends with a complex metric alternation (2/4, 2/8, 3/4, 4/4, 2/4).

**Trajan** (*a catalyzing character, plane X – a direct correlation*) is an impetuous, dramatic character. Musically, this translates into a dialogue between *Trajan and Decebalus*). In Trajan's score, the composer is guided by the meaning of the message, by the expression of the words. Trajan's impulsive nature is translated musically through harsh sonorities, abrupt contours, determined rhythms. Most of his interventions in this dialogue start off with an octave leap and, then, the melodic line moves downward. The musical web is combined with various, consonant and dissonant intervallic leaps, in which most predominant are the leaps of octave, seventh, sixth, augmented second, diminished fifth, everything evolving in the *F Phrygian* mode. In his musical discourse, Zgureanu also employs an ascending modal scale which denotes the presence of the *F Phrygian mode* (with the 3<sup>rd</sup> scale degree ascended – *A natural*, thus insinuating the presence of *F major*).

The character has a concise discourse, but of a great expressive sagacity, thanks to the following techniques:

- the alternative metrics (3/4, 4/4, 3/4, 4/4, 3/4, 2/4);
- multi-coloured intervallic presence, with both consonant and dissonant intervals;
- the use of *glissando*.
- the shift from *singing voice* to *spoken voice*;
- the alternation of tempos.

**Armin and Ninvana** (*expository characters, plane Y – an indirect correlation*)

Zgureanu sketches the feelings of the two youngsters in tender, warm colours. Armin's entrance is accompanied by spectacular sonorities, followed by Ninvana's aria, which goes on with even more passion, turning into a love duet, [with the development of the melodic trajectories in an intervallic ratio of 3m (reference no. 4), oscillating between the modes *C Phrygian* and *C Locrian*], which remains in that effusion of lyricism. The composer has the idea of ending the duet with a hymn in *Andantino* (*Long Live / Happy Birthday...*).

We can notice here some sound progressions which serve the text, culminating with the moment when the two confess to love one another. Zgureanu has managed to evoke the rich universe of emotions of the two lovers. They are musically portrayed through some eminently lyrical techniques. The generous cantilena with romantic reminiscences, melodic phrases with stops on large rhythmic values - the composer seems to take his listeners towards the musical spheres of the operetta genre (Armin's song and Ninvana's Aria).

**Dokia** (*expository character, plane Y – an indirect correlation*) – one of the most luminous and lyrical characters of the opera. The girl is a special personality, unique, melancholic, dreamy and lonesome. She lives in isolation, longing for love. Dokia is the one who abandons herself into the arms of the warm and gentle nature, living discreetly, impersonally, anonymously. It is only the indefinite, multiple and continuous longing that enhances her presence, while deepening her mystery. Her aria suggests feelings of loneliness and unquenchable longing. The composer writes with smoothness and musicality. Most of the vocal line is subjected to a unique atmosphere, revealing the dramatic accents of a solitary and intensely tormented existence. The musical expression suggests restlessness, but in an intimate, delicate proportion. The musical discourse is built on consonant and dissonant intervals, used either through leaps or through gradual

THE MUSICAL PORTRAYAL OF CHARACTERS IN THE LYRICAL GENRE

progression, and it is included in a totally expressed modal universe. The melodic trajectory (*Dokia and the Shepherds' Choir*) develops in *E Dorian* (reference no. 2) and *E Eolian* (reference numbers 3-4), and the one from "*The Shepherds' and Shepherdesses' Choir*" develops in *E Locrian* and *E minor harmonic*. It then goes into *A Locrian* (*B flat, E flat*) through *G Locrian* (*A flat, D flat*). The last measures end in *F Phrygian* (*G flat*).

In the following table we can see the presence of each character in the overall opera:

**Table 1.**

Act	Dramaturgic function	Participants	Name given by the composer
I.	Action -Portrait	Duras - Diurpaneus, Decebalus, Zamolxis	The coronation of Decebalus
	Dialogue-Portrait	Decebalus – The Queen	The Duet: Decebalus – The Queen
	Portrait	The Queen	The Queen's Aria
II.	Portrait	Dokia	Dokia and the Shepherds' Choir
	Portrait	Armin	Armin's song
	Portrait	Ninvana	Ninvana's Aria
	Divertimento/entertainment - action	Armin, Ninvana	The duet Armin-Ninvana ("the Wedding" and "Long Live..")
III.	Action - Portrait	Priest Vezina	Priest Vezina and the soldiers
	Portrait	Decebalus's son	Monologue of Decebalus's son
	Portrait	Decebalus	Aria of Decebalus
	Dialogue – action - Portrait	Decebalus, Trajan	Dialogue Trajan - Decebalus
	Portrait	Decebalus	Monologue of Decebalus "in front of" History;

The entire score is built upon a bipolar arching, according to the principle *arsis*<sup>4</sup> and *thesis*<sup>5</sup>, in which the sound images carry a poetic load that adds to the meanings and density of the poetic text, thus doubling the effect. The work evolves gradually from contemplation to the dramatic and then again to contemplation. In his work, the musical outline takes shape from quasi-relaxation and from the build-up of states of conflict. His entire work proves to us the permanent complementarity of the horizontal outline

<sup>4</sup> *arsis* – ascent, fulfillment

<sup>5</sup> *thesis* – gloomy, burdening, painful atmosphere

LUMINIȚA STOIAN

(the melody) with the vertical one (the harmony), parameters meant to ensure the homogeneity and cohesion of the language elements used by the composer.

Teodor Zgureanu acts as a musician that has found his own style, his own way of expression, thus bringing an original voice to the Bessarabian music.

### REFERENCES

- Daicoviciu Hadrian, *Portrete dacice (Dacian portraits)*, Ed. Militară, București, 1984.  
Zgureanu, Teodor, *Decebal – reduction, manuscript* (reducție pentru pian, manuscris), 1998.  
Zgureanu, Teodor, *Decebal – score, manuscript* (partitură, manuscris), 1999.