

**THE CLUJ MODERN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC FESTIVAL
ANALYZED BY ITS ORGANIZER,
PH.D. PROFESSOR ADRIAN POP
– INTERVIEW –**

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The *Cluj Modern* festival represents a landmark in Romanian cultural life; getting accustomed to and understanding modern music are the main goals of the event. Even though the promotion of contemporary music is the pursuit of other national festivals as well, in the seasons of philharmonics and opera houses which perform this type of repertoire, the festival receives laudatory reviews from specialists due to its good organization and remarkable artistic level in performance and composition.

The editions of the *Cluj Modern* Festival succeed one another every two years, and the organizers are always trying to offer memorable, meaningful programmes, which represent milestones in Romanian music. The 2017 edition proved to be a success, confirming one of the most important events in the promotion of contemporary Romanian music, while the public in Cluj seems to be more receptive to this type of music than in other parts of the country. Professor and composer Adrian Pop, who has dedicated himself to the organization of the festival since its ninth edition in 2009, has shared with us a few defining details about the organization of this year's edition of the *Cluj Modern* Festival, the problems that he faced during the history of the event, as well as suggestions and strategies for the promotion and organization of future editions:



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Adrian Pop: „From my point of view, the main problem confronting cultural life all over the world, in Romania and in Cluj county nowadays, is connected to the decreasing level of culture offered by schools. We are experiencing an enlargement of the notion of culture, which does not lack certain welcome opportunities and perspectives, nevertheless bringing along a certain trivialization, since there should be a differentiated preoccupation for higher culture, authentic culture, and kitsch. With the democratisation of the genres, in particular, this differentiation becomes impossible to make. Sociologists approach culture in a quite simplistic manner, with such a wide scope that the term „culture” tends to lose its contours.

In this situation, a local administration – which is not a cultural forum par excellence, but an administrative one which has, among other things, certain cultural functions – is trying to have an open vision, including a very large range of events: from the Beer Festival to the festivals organized by the Opera or the Philharmonic. The matter in question is: which is the hierarchy that encloses, financially speaking, the cultural projects that the local board considers worthy of support? Because if we confront the amounts paid by the local administration (the local administration of Cluj in this case), that is, as they say, maybe tens of thousands of Euros for a DJ who is just „mixing” music on his devices with thousands of basses, with the modest funding given to a festival like the *Cluj Musical Autumn*, it means that the scale of cultural values is not very clear. A niche festival like *Cluj Modern*, with features that offer it an aura of uniqueness in the city’s cultural landscape, receives insignificant fractions of the amount paid to a DJ, and this is painful for us, the ones who work in the so-called „higher culture” and become aware of such situations in the same way that a sociologist would.

As far as I can perceive, the local administration is making efforts along a line that is not attracted to an elitist zone, quite on the contrary, it is a rather populist line, and the justification is the massive audience and probably the circulation of money, since whatever is sold in large amounts yields a proportional income.

The identifying attributes of *Cluj Modern* are, first of all, the promotion of contemporary classical music, that is, of art culture, of ‘high art’, an elite art to which all great musicians such as Bach, Beethoven and so on paid their tribute along history and, as an extension of this art and its issues, the numerous searches, insights, innovations, experiments or syntheses signed by contemporary musicians.

One attribute of the Cluj Modern festival is a type of programmes that somehow exit the usual frame of this type of festivals, which are generally interested strictly in actual matters, in the newest music pieces,

the newest ideas, the most “bizarre” ways of expression and so on, a kind of “actuality of actualities”. The organizers of *Cluj Modern* seek to highlight also the stylistic roots of contemporary music, starting from the beginning of 20th century modernism. To this end the festival presents, in the same programme, new, even last minute pieces, along with pieces that represent landmarks, models that initiated stylistic lines throughout the 20th century, continuing this trend into the 21st century – because at this moment we aren’t yet able to distinguish, from a stylistic point of view, what is actually different in this first part of the 21st century from what we inherited from the 20th; this shall be the task of future researchers – to observe and note differences.

The history of the *Cluj Modern* Festival has begun under the auspices of the support given by the Ministry of Culture, which financed a first edition upon the proposal of composer Cornel Țăranu: this is why Cornel Țăranu is the founding director of the festival. It was a post-1989 event, characteristic of our openness to communication with the world on all levels, including through culture, and it is, in chronological order, the second festival in this field launched after the Revolution. (In 1990 the International Week of New Music was founded in Bucharest, which is since then the main music festival in Romania and is organized annually.) After not so many years, I think in 1995, Cornel Țăranu started the festival in Cluj. The Ministry of Culture financed the whole festival, which shows a type of attitude which was a prolongation of the former totalitarian period, when the ministry had been the unique financing source for such events and had taken the entire responsibility for them. Nowadays it is extremely difficult to get funding from the Ministry of Culture for this kind of actions... As soon as the second edition of *Cluj Modern* (1997), the new times started to gain ground, where the Ministry of Culture became rather an independent player and ceased assuming responsibility for everything that went on in the country.

As a matter of fact, we know that in 1990 the Ministry of Culture disposed of all the Philharmonics, passing them on to local financing bodies (and annulling the character of national cultural network that all cultural institutions of the state used to have), keeping only a few lyric theatre institutions. For a very awkward reason: if their frontispiece said the „Romanian Opera” and the „National Theatre”, it meant that they were indeed of national interest. If it didn’t, they were of local interest. Let us make an observation: London too has an *English National Opera* which used to perform repertoires translated into English and not in the original languages. So, the word “national” was merely the specification of an orientation - the cultivation of the national language in the performance. In Romania, this attribute was considered an indication of the level, therefore of the importance. The Philharmonics, none of them having the word

'national' in their titles, fell into a category of lesser importance! Only the *George Enescu* Philharmonic in Bucharest remained directly dependent on the Ministry, so we have now only one national level orchestra – scriptically speaking, because in reality some of the orchestras in Romania have national value implicitly, but no longer formally and scriptically. Against this background of administrative and political confusion, that we cannot easily escape, it is no wonder that the contemporary music festival in Cluj remained unfinanced already on its second edition.

The first edition held under the patronage of the Ministry of Culture had the *Gheorghe Dima* Music Academy and the 'Transilvania' State Philharmonic as its partners, and this resulted in a memorable, beautiful edition, which set a high standard from the very beginning. For the second edition, the financing didn't come anymore, and Cornel Țăranu, who took it upon himself to continue his initiative, laid the question of the festival's continuation before the board of the Music Academy, headed back then by Alexandru Fărcaș, a dynamic, extremely wilful rector, eager to extend academic activities, who immediately got involved in the festival's organization. Ever since, the rectors of the *Gheorghe Dima* Music Academy have also been executive directors of the festival. Master Țăranu has also been ever since involved in directing the artistic administration, and the festival is by now well established in this healthy periodicity of biennial organisation in odd years.

When I became rector of the Music Academy myself, I automatically became the executive director of the 2009 edition of the festival, in which I participated much more than an executive director would, in the sense that my personal history comprises more than twenty years of organizing musical events as artistic secretary, artistic advisor and general director of the 'Transilvania' State Philharmonic. And then, obviously, together with Cornel Țăranu, I dealt more and more with such matters as programmes and repertoires, so that in this last edition, the programming initiatives belonged 90% to me, while Cornel Țăranu supported me with suggestions and critiques, as appropriate. This is why the Music Academy is now completely involved in organizing this prestigious event, from concept and programming to fundraising, partnerships and so on, contributing of course with its own financial effort, proudly carrying on this festival and succeeding to maintain it at a high standard. Among the partnerships, a constant and extremely valuable one over the last editions has been that with the 'Transilvania' Philharmonic, which adds its symphonic and vocal-symphonic participation, with an exceptional contribution to the public's education in new music. We must notice with satisfaction that the inspiredly chosen symphonic programmes and the brilliant performances offered by the Philharmonic's ensembles have enriched each edition with glorious finales.

The *Cluj Modern* Festival is a moment of maximal display of our potential including, beside students, our teaching staff, as well as artistic forces that belong to the institution or were educated in the institution. It is therefore a showcase of our potential in this repertory field, a peak technical challenge. It is a tour de force in which we can measure our capacity and the highest outcomes of our educational process through our educators, our alumni and the students still studying at the Academy.

The local community gains an advantage too, because the festival has in the meantime included a musicology symposium focused on problems of composition in relationship to its specific issues, and this symposium is already regarded abroad as a high level event, people are writing about it and it is attended by important guests. This year we had a special surprise when a person, a young musicologist from Cambridge, travelled to Romania especially in order to attend the symposium, without being involved in an official programme of academic mobility; just like that, finding out about what goes on in Cluj, he wanted to participate. This is a very concrete example of what it brings to our local community: a surplus of interest, of cultural brilliance, which the town obviously praises, and eventually it is part of this trade mark of Cluj as a university city, which it has gained in time and maintains with pride and competence.

The promotion of this festival has started from us, with the support of our media partners, who have been extremely receptive, both locally and centrally. I think that for a niche festival, a festival so specialized as *Cluj Modern*, the promotion was very good, with an almost "aggressive" presence and insistence. Now we ask ourselves: how does the public respond to this promotion? We want to gain a, let us say, 'neutral' audience, from the outside, whom we praise greatly; to have in our halls not just the specialists seeking to grasp the phenomenon of contemporary music 'live', and who have a certain eye for it and a certain interest, but also the normal music loving audience. We are certainly aware of the abyss between contemporary music, with its complexity, oddness, even aggressiveness, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, an audience who does not always have such considerations in mind and who might feel less attracted, or sometimes even rejected by this less conventional phenomenon. We want to counteract the negative reaction, to be convincing by carefully balanced programmes, and to win a public who can see that contemporary art is a little different from the art that "pleasantly tickles the ears", or one consumes with a steak and a bear, that this mode of expression can arouse interest and is worth attending. To this end we configure the concerts' presentations, the large screen that offers extra details about what is being heard, the historical-didactical part that tries to show where we, contemporary composers, come from, and who our predecessors are.

For an act of culture taking place in the public space, I think it is necessary to have tickets sold; I am personally completely against the idea that more people will come if the access is free. Our tickets had a symbolic price, they did not help much in recovering the investment in the performances, but we sold tickets in order to have this feed-back: who wants to come buys a ticket – only electoral events are free. I have always invoked here the frontispiece of the Society for the administration of authors' rights in Germany, to which I used to be affiliated (as well as other Romanian composers during communism; not having our authors' rights protected outside Romania, we had to become, rather secretly, affiliated members of such societies in Europe: either of the French society SACEM in Paris, or in Switzerland, or where each individual had a chance to enrol). And this society, called GEMA (founded among others by Richard Strauss, one of the great composers of post-Romantic music), had the following motto: *music has its own value*. It referred to the fact that, in order to have a share in a musical event, one must support, by buying an entry ticket, one's share of the financial effort behind it. Of course, at that time, when one didn't have music "in one's pocket", one had to go to concerts. Which is even now an event superior to listening in headphones. And if we succeed in arousing curiosity, even in creating a guarantee, we expect people to praise that also through the ticket bought for what we offer.

I can have at this moment no suggestions for improving the festival's promotion, since all channels have been used, including *FaceBook*, which is very efficient. I believe this is the right direction. If any new media and means of promotion appear, any specialized agencies, we shall use them. I think promotion is and should be proportional to what the public's taste can find attractive in the festival, so that as for now I think we can be satisfied.

It is a bit more difficult for us to evaluate the impact on the local public, but because we had paid entrance tickets, this was a first element of measurement. We can quantify by the number of tickets sold, also by the number of programme booklets – which we draft very carefully, they are nice and have always been appreciated and requested. The key to increasing the audience is the insistent continuation along the same path, using the positive experience to its full potential.

As regards the format and frame of the events, I consider the already mentioned partnership with the "Transilvania" State Philharmonic to be a very positive experience, which closes the festival with a symphonic concert, where the Philharmonic's subscribers and audience come in much higher numbers than to a cameral concert. The selection of symphonic pieces is one meant to offer the public a greatly varied repertoire. If I were to speak of this year's programme, we opened with a piece by Kristoph Penderecki

that has a strident, aggressive and upsetting auditory impression, and which is a landmark of contemporary music, *Threnos* for the victims of Hiroshima. Now, when people are again talking all the time about the dangers of a nuclear war, I think that such a *memento* – which was not placed here intentionally, as at the time we drafted the programme the agitation around the North-Korean atomic programme had not yet started – has a very strong impact in the present circumstances. After that we had a concerto piece by a Hungarian composer, *Violin Concerto* by Miklós Csemiczky, a score of an evident neo-classical orientation, pointing towards a continuation of tradition and a highly accessible language: an almost Romantic concert, with a flowing, melodic, “kind to the ear” music. We thus created a huge difference between the two pieces, which were actually the poles of certain stylistic options, a sign that the “stylistic democracy” of the present cultural period, temporarily called post-modernism, has reached a peak, so that any kind of stylistic option is possible now. And in the second part, a piece for saxophone and orchestra by Cornel Țăranu, reflecting his style of synthesis between modernism and a subtle refreshment from the area of the Romanian folklore, and a highly sensitive vocal-symphonic piece by Cristian Misievici, called *Lamentation and release*, which turns into sound the pain felt on the death of a beloved person, composer Vasile Spătărelu, Misievici’s composition professor. The piece was not written immediately after Spătărelu’s death, but later on, and reflects something more profound than an obituary. It is an extremely good piece, with folkloric and expressionistic touches, with alhorn sounds, religious chant, semantron, bells, an impressive piece of work, very close to our understanding. Thus everyone at the concert left with a rounded idea – in spite of the extreme stylistic variety.

Due to the repertoire we approach and the standard of the performances, we try to determine the audience to return to concerts consisting wholly of contemporary music, which is not an easy task. We have undertaken to increase the available audience around this very substantial stylistic line represented by contemporary music. We think we have noticed that the audience of this festival is, on the average, superior to the audiences of other such events in other parts of the country. It means that, on the one hand, Cluj may have a public with a more sensitive receptiveness, and, on the other hand, that what we are trying to do for this public is balanced, appropriate, and therefore efficient and yielding.

Organizing the festival is a an artistic pleasure in itself: planning all the things we’ve talked about, evaluating the impact on the audience, shaping a stylistic and historical meaning, looking for the novelty and variety of a repertoire whose freshness combined with things that are by now „classical” is a challenge. Envisioning a nice presentation, looking for

images, selecting significant photographs and so on is, after all, a kind of artistic work. The fact that creates a serious pressure is the necessity of raising funds for such an event. This festival starts from zero every time; it has no own funds, the ministry does not offer any money, as it used to. It is not quite easy either to address administrative bodies directly, the new administration is somewhat barricaded in this respect; this is obviously not a general phenomenon, of course, but one gets this feeling that I, as a person with a longer experience in the cultural activity, did not have before. We are living in a new era, the era of „projects”, of novelty (the era when the references of a scientific work must come “from the past two years”), a mentality which does not completely lack justification, while nevertheless favouring various improvisations to the detriment of the continuity of traditional events. (Fortunately, decision makers have also noticed this, so that from now on the evaluation of projects that are going to receive new financing takes into account the factor of perennity as well). So, if there is a field in which we want more and better, or superior receptiveness that would be the field of financing.

Imagining, planning and organizing the next edition of the *Cluj Modern* Festival have already started. Because we intend to invite foreign artists and we wish to be included in their calendar, we must envision the course of the festival in due time. In fact, we talk to the main performers, who must get accustomed to the repertoire from all points of view, and we make sure that they can be paid. When one works either on a project that would depend first of all – or solely on one’s own forces, or when drafting an economic project, which depends on a carefully drafted business plan, it is a different matter, but in a festival one must convince a lot of people to believe in the viability of the event, and plan their future schedule according to it. And the ones who can help must be convinced that you will build an event that will represent a landmark in Romanian culture. And then they must all keep their word... In the financial history of the festival there was a moment when a substantial financing promised by the Local Council was later withdrawn, not because of their fault, it was the effect of a certain context, of a way of understanding certain phrases in the law that dealt with the financing of cultural actions. The paradox is that the Local Council, that is sufficiently strong and engaged, offers sponsoring based on a very limitative line of interpretation, in which, for instance, they forbid the selling of tickets, which is absurd; or, equally absurd, they do not have permission to finance an art institution (such as a university) for organizing cultural events outside its current object of activity – this interpretation being the durable reminiscence of a critique once formulated by the Court of Accounts, an abusive interpretation in my opinion. The *Gheorghe Dima*

Music Academy is caught in this game and can no longer have access to funds from the Local Council for its events, and I am not talking only about *Cluj Modern* here. I think that in writing and reading certain law texts we get entangled in words and obstructions, which sometimes emerge in our society, unfortunately.

This year's festival edition had for the first time financing from the Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN), due to a fortunate synchronization with the submission deadlines of projects. For 2017 the call for projects opened in September 2016 and we were able to submit our project to AFCN, which got the highest score among the projects submitted in that session. And then we had a relative financial comfort, since the AFCN, unlike many other sponsors, did not negotiate and diminish the amount we had asked for. We calculated a budget and the AFCN evaluated the project, it said it was good and financed it. The Romanian Cultural Institute also helped us, and so we had two supporters: the AFCN with a substantial amount and the Romanian Cultural Institute as main partner together with the *Transilvania* State Philharmonic in Cluj, which was also a main partner. With this triangle and with the forces and efforts of the Music Academy we could organize a festival with very good feedback, which accomplished many of its goals.

With a lot of hope I think the financing policy of the Local Council might be, actually should be changed: not being able to enjoy, in your home town, the support of this institution is regrettable. The Local Council is the first gate to which the festival's organizers should regain access, and which should take it into consideration every edition as a constant event. We are finally beginning to talk about constant events that build history and not only about projects that show up sporadically. Somewhere, the mentality of projects becomes mature, and we must adhere to the new techniques of festival advertising and organizing fund raising actions for the next edition of the event.

