

## THE CULTURAL LIFE OF CLUJ IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

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**SUMMARY.** The 20<sup>th</sup> century is considered to be the most contradictory and unsettled period in the history of the entire world culture. The cultural traditions of a nation strongly connect the creations and practices of the past with the present societies; they represent an expression of their spirituality and soul. The Romanian cultural identity, which is constantly changing, keeps a close connection with its previous historical events. The future of a certain society depends largely on how the cultural history is perceived and interpreted by the collective consciousness. In the period between the two World Wars in Romania, there was great concern for the integration of the Romanian national culture with the European one. The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is rightly regarded as the *golden age* of Romanian culture, which reached its highest level of international affirmation during time.

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*“The city of Cluj was, for more than half of a millennium, a cultural centre. It had schools, writers, chroniclers; it could have been named a small Athens”.*

Academician Camil Mureșanu

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is considered to be the most contradictory and unsettled period in the history of the entire world culture. Looking back, from a detached and lucid perspective, the image that is shown to us is that of a restless succession of artistic movements of the most diverse philosophical influences.

The cultural traditions of a nation strongly connect the creations and practices of the past with the present societies, representing an expression of their spirituality and soul. The manner in which the past of a community is studied greatly influences its present and future. Every nation transposes its historical events in its cultural works, expressing its identity according to different fields of activity, such as music, fine arts, philosophy, sciences, social or religion.

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The Romanian cultural identity, which is constantly changing, keeps a close connection with its previous historical events. A possible definition of a cultural history would be that of a continuous replay of the traditions of the past through the creations of the present, a reinterpretation of the major, symbolic themes that have marked the previous historical contexts or some events in the modern evolution of a society in relation to a new historical circumstance.

The future of a certain society depends largely on how the cultural history is perceived and interpreted by the collective consciousness. The cultural heritage of a nation is kept alive thanks to the values which have a great influence on its future, assuming motifs and ideas, having as sources of inspiration other civilizations or cultures with which it comes into contact.

In the period between the two World Wars in Romania, there was great concern for the integration of the Romanian national culture into the European one. Romanian music was in the process of refining its language and was rallying at the European composition styles; in this context the Romanian Radio (1928) was born which played a major role in Romanian cultural life. The broadcast music programs were enjoyed by a very large audience, thus strengthening the spiritual unity of the nation.

During this period, many musical cultural institutions were founded, such as the Choral Society *Carmen* (1901), the Associations of Romanian Music (1902) the Music journal (1915), the Lyrical Society *Opera* (1919), the Opera of Cluj (1920), the Choral Society *Cântarea României* (1919), the Society of Composers (1920), the new Philharmonic orchestra (1920), the Union of the Instrumental Artists (1923), the Reunion of the Hungarian Choirs (1923) and the Conservatoire of Music and Dramatic Arts of Chernivtsi (1924).

The Romanian national musical culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century is marked by two diverging directions: on one hand, the recovery of two centuries of European tradition in the art of composition; on the other, achieving the national-folkloric specificity of the works. The predominant role in this period is given to composers whose aesthetic tends towards combining stylistic individuality with a national specific. Alfred Alessandrescu (1893-1959), Dimitrie Cuclin (1885-1978), Mihail Jora (1891-1971), Sabin Drăgoi (1894-1968) and George Enescu (1881-1955), representative composers of this period, perfected their technique in Romanian and European schools, with symphonic, chamber, choral and lyric genres.

### **The Conservatoire**

In Cluj, an old cultural centre with a tradition of centuries, the Conservatoire of Music and Dramatic Art was founded on October 1, 1919, with Gheorghe Dima as rector, succeeded by Augustin Bena.

The Conservatoire of Cluj included the following courses: 1. Composition with 4 years of study; 2. Instrumental, 7 years for the piano, violin, cello and 6 for the other instruments; 3. Singing class, 5 years; 4. Drama, 4 years; 5. Pedagogical

studies, 4 years. From 1922, aspiring teachers could improve by the study of courses in musical history, aesthetics, acoustics, general pedagogy and music, psychology and pedagogical practice. In 1931, the institution changed its name to the Academy of Music and Dramatic Art.

Music lovers of Cluj could hear the great George Enescu in three concerts as a violinist and as a conductor in a symphonic concert which featured his own Suite in C Major and First Rhapsody in A Major for orchestra as well as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in C minor, op. 67.

### **The Symphony Orchestras**

The beginnings of symphonic activity in Cluj go back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and were supported first by the Hungarian Theatre Orchestra, then by the Musical Society and the Circle of Music; in the period between the Two World Wars, the support came from the orchestra of the Romanian Opera and the Goldmark orchestra, an instrumental ensemble of a Hebrew city community.

After numerous requests, in September 1955 the City Council decided to establish the State Philharmonic of Cluj, which would provide new dimensions for the artistic movement in Cluj.

The students' orchestra of the "Gheorghe Dima" Conservatoire, conducted by maestro Antonin Ciolan, demonstrated the potential of young musicians, having been noticed at the competition of orchestras during the Word Festival of Youth and Students in 1953 in Bucharest, which turned out to be of importance in the decision of establishing the Philharmonic. The orchestra was formed by musicians from the Romanian Opera of Cluj, some of them also being teachers at the Conservatoire.

### **The Romanian Opera of Cluj**

This cultural institution was created in 1919 as the first institution of its kind in Romania, with Pavel Constantin as director. The first official symphonic concert of the season took place on May 13, 1920, with the singer Dimitrie Popovici-Bayreuth being appointed as the new director, after the retirement of Pavel Constantin. The first opera in Romanian in Cluj which was performed on May 25, 1920 was *Aida* by G. Verdi.

In subsequent years, on the stage of the Romanian Opera in Cluj, many international operatic masterpieces were staged, such as *La Traviata*, *The Troubadour* and *Un ballo in maschera* by G. Verdi, *Faust* by Ch. Gounod, *Madama Butterfly* by G. Puccini, *Tannhäuser* by R. Wagner, *Carmen* by G. Bizet, *Lakmé* by L. Delibes, *Fidelio* by L. van Beethoven etc. National operas were not forgotten, the repertoire including works such as *Luceafărul* by N. Bretan, *Făt-Frumos* by H. Kiee, *Seara mare* and *La șezătoare* by T. Brediceanu, as

well as *Crai nou* by C. Porumbescu.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the performances in Cluj, the company toured numerous cities, including Bucharest, Arad, Timisoara, Oradea and Chernivtsi.

For a period of time, the National Theatre of Cluj, the Romanian Opera as well as the Music Academy relocated their headquarters to Timisoara, where they continued their artistic performances at the same high level of those in Cluj.

### **The Theatre**

After the union on the Great National Day, the building which had belonged to the National Theatre for the Hungarian people since 1906 became the Romanian National Theatre on the 1st of October 1919. However, some months before, on May 14, 1919, the first performance in Romanian took place on the new theatre stage, supported by prestigious artists of the National Theatre in Bucharest. The repertoire of this spectacle included *Poemul Unirii* by Zaharia Bârsan and the well known play of B.P. Hasdeu, *Răzvan și Vidra*.<sup>3</sup>

In the next period, Zaharia Bârsan, the director of the new institution, began to organize the theatrical band, recruiting the actors and auxiliary staff needed to carry out cultural activities. The official season of the National Theatre was inaugurated on December 1, 1919, making the first anniversary of the historical union between Transylvania and Romania.

Afterwards, there were years of rich cultural activity, the repertoire containing many masterpieces of dramatic national and universal literature. The annual seasons were always opened with works by Romanian classical authors, among which were Vasile Alecsandri, Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, Alexandru Davilla and Ion Luca Caragiale. In its first ten years there were 1198 performances, of which 182 were premieres, including those played by the theatrical team outside the city boundaries.

### **The Hungarian Theatre**

After the unification of Transylvania with Romania, the Hungarian artistic life in this part of the country took place without any obstacles, which was noticed by the renowned Hungarian playwright Jenő Janovics who gratefully declared that the Romanian authorities had nothing against the cultural activities of the Hungarian theatres.

The Hungarian Theatre of Cluj presented 393 shows in the 1920-1921 seasons, that number growing to 802 in 1939-1940 seasons, with more than

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<sup>2</sup> PASCU, Ștefan, *Istoria Clujului (The History of Cluj)*. The Council Of Cluj Publishing House, Cluj, 1974, p. 425

<sup>3</sup> *Idem*, p. 424

300,000 spectators. At first, the repertoire consisted of modern plays, especially those of Ibsen, Strindberg, Hauptmann, Gorky, Bernard Shaw and Tristan Bernard.

In the period between the Two World Wars, the repertoire included classical writers such as Shakespeare, Schiller and Molière, but of course, the repertoire was dominated by Hungarian drama, including Katona József's *Bánk Bán* and *Az ember tragédiája* (*The Human Tragedy*) by Imre Madách.<sup>4</sup>

The Hungarian Theatre of Cluj played an important role in promoting Romanian drama by making it accessible to the Hungarian public. The first Romanian work represented on stage of this cultural institution was *Prometheus* by Victor Eftimiu, the author being actually present at the performance. The series of Romanian works were later continued with the famous *O scrisoare pierdută* by I.L. Caragiale, *Patima roșie* by Mihail Sorbul, *Zamolxe* by Lucian Blaga, as well as the works *Din tată-n fiu* and *Meșterul Manole* by Nicolae Iorga, himself also being present at the performances. Subsequently, other works by contemporary Romanian playwrights were presented to the delight of Hungarian audiences, including the authors Ion Minulescu, Octavian Goga and Ion Marin Sadoveanu.

The cultural past of Cluj testifies that in certain moments of the historical evolution, in the specific conditions of Transylvania, the struggles and conflicts of the history sometimes had cultural positive effects. Therefore, the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is rightly regarded as the *golden age* of Romanian culture, where the highest level of international affirmation was achieved.

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<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, p. 426

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