

## TRADITION AND MODERNISM IN THE WORKS OF WILHELM GEORG BERGER; *SONATA FOR VIOLA AND CELLO OP. 18*

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**SUMMARY.** This study aims to reveal the blend of the traditional with the modern in the works of Wilhelm Georg Berger, based on the analysis of the *Sonata for Viola and Cello Op. 18* composed in 1962. His work covers more than 50 years, a period in which his style transformed so that Berger composes applying principles formulated through the assiduous research of the musical phenomena, being familiar, in detail, with the old as well as the new. In the first part of the analysis, I shall briefly present aspects of his multidisciplinary personality, starting from the cultural background and context in which Berger created. In the second part, I shall analyze the *Sonata for Viola and Cello Op. 18*, from which I have selected the elements I have considered the most relevant in highlighting the blending between traditional and modern. The aspects are selected through the lens of formal, harmonic, modal, rhythmic, or aesthetic points of view.

**Keywords:** Wilhelm Georg Berger, traditional, modern, *Sonata for Viola and Cello Op. 18*

The second half of the last century is characterized by a paradigm shift in musical creation: the tonal–atonal conflict from the beginning of the 20th century will be replaced by the binomial 'modern at any cost' – 'modern connected to tradition', a change that is felt in the landscape of Romanian musical creation as well. There are various stylistic orientations; on the one hand, there is a group that manifests new stylistic orientations (such as Anatol Vieru, Tiberiu Olah, Aurel Stroe, Myriam Marbé or Cornel Țăranu), and on the other hand, there is a group that seeks to combine the old with the new and

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remains close to the aesthetics of Enescu (such as Pascal Bentoiu, Dumitru Capoianu, Wilhelm Georg Berger or Theodor Grigoriu). The composers from both groups taken as examples, belong to the prolific generation active after 1950 and will be considered as belonging to the categories: 'modern-radical' and 'modern-moderate,' respectively<sup>2</sup>. This classification, however, is not absolute, as Anatol Vieru, a so-called radical, and Wilhelm Georg Berger, a so-called moderate, shared the same concern for the modal system in their volumes published just one year apart<sup>3</sup>. Berger's theory is based on the use of Fibonacci's sequence in the intervallic structure of the modes generating 12 types of modes. The modal scales he defines in this way have a significant melodic essence<sup>4</sup>. This theory is also shared by Aurel Stroe in *Arcade (Arches)* published in 1962, a work in which Stroe uses the modal constructions defined by Berger. However, even if the language used in composition is modern, Berger's work reveals a predilection for classical structures and the way he organizes the musical discourse.

If we consider Berger's cultural background, we can understand that his preference for traditions, which he assimilates with new stylistic trends, may be due to his early familiarity with Protestant music. In addition, Berger developed an autonomous composition system focused on order and systematization, combining Baroque and Classical architectural elements with the modern modal language. Counterpoint is among the elaborate techniques used in polyphonic constructions, and the musical discourse is associated with a distinct imprint of tradition regarding the structure, reflected in the use of combinations of fixed and improvisational forms.

Wilhelm Georg Berger was born in Rupea, into a Saxon family that, by tradition, cherished music and considered it indispensable for education. The first musical notions were learned in the family, as well as sometimes the first contact with a musical instrument. Berger grew up in such an environment, learned to play the organ, the violin, to conduct a choir and, under the guidance of his uncle, Konrad Kramberger, he assimilated his first notions of musical science<sup>5</sup>. Later, his musical personality developed in a multidisciplinary manner.

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<sup>2</sup> Valentina Sandu-Dediu. "Despre moderații și radicali: Hermann Danuser" in "Octave paralele" (*About Moderates and Radicals; Hermann Danuser in Parallel Octaves*), Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, p. 211.

<sup>3</sup> "Cartea modurilor" (*The Book of Modes*) by Aurel Stroe appears in 1980, one year after the appearance of Berger's volume *Modal Dimensions*.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Georg Berger. „Moduri și proporții”, în „Dimensiuni modale” (*Modes and Proportions* in *Modal Dimensions*), Musical Publishing House, București, 1979, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> Tudor Mihai. "Wilhelm Georg Berger: teoretician și compozitor" (*Wilhelm Georg Berger: Theoretician and Composer*), 2021, p. 1.

<https://www.scribd.com/document/490625856/Wilhelm-Georg-Berger-1929-1993-SEC-XX> [6.02.2024]

He completed his studies at the Bucharest Conservatory between 1948 and 1952 where he studied under remarkable personalities: Alexandru Rădulescu (viola), Ioan Șerfezi (theory and solfeggio), Zeno Vancea (history of music) or Theodor Rogalski (orchestration). At the same time, he took private violin lessons with Cecilia Nițulescu-Lupu and Anton Adrian Sarvaș and chamber music lessons with Benjamin Bernfeld. He began his career as a performer, playing the viola in the A. A. Sarvaș Quartet, then in the George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra in Bucharest, and in the quartet of the Union of Composers, of which he was a founding member. The Quartet of the Union of Composers will be the ensemble that will perform numerous premieres of works by Romanian composers of the time.

In 1951, Berger completed his first work, *Lobgesänge in der Nacht*, a cycle of lieder for soprano and organ, using ten poems by Maria Scherg, from the volume *Jahr und Leben*, so that his passion for composition shall grow together with his interpretative activity. His oeuvre will encompass works in numerous genres (excluding opera): in addition to the 24 symphonies and 21 string quartets, there will be added miniatures, cycles of lieder, oratorios, concertos, sonatas, and masses. Not many composers got national and international recognition such as Berger had. Is distinguished with the price “Prince Rainier III de Monaco”, Monte Carlo – 1964 for the *Sonata for solo violin op.24*, 1st Prize at the International Composition Competition, Liege – 1965 for the *String Quartet no. 6 „Epos”*, 1st Prize at the International Competition Queen Elisabeth of Belgium, Brussels – 1966 for the *Concert for violin and orchestra*<sup>6</sup>.

The effervescence shown in his art of composition was combined with his tireless curiosity in researching musical phenomena. Similar practice can be found in the musical thinking of Paul Hindemith and Olivier Messiaen. Berger himself admitted his affinity with the language of Hindemith or Reger<sup>7</sup>. Thus, volumes such as *Aesthetics of Sonatas, Modal Dimensions, Symphonic Music* in 5 Volumes, *The String Quartet from Haydn to Debussy*, *The String Quartet from Reger to Enescu*, *Guide for Chamber Instrumental Music* and many others will be published. His interest in music theory started long before the publication of the first volume (1965). I also recall here the *Quantity and Quality Analysis of the Sound Field* of 1950 which, unfortunately, remained unpublished. In the last part of his career, Berger returned to performance as

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<sup>6</sup> Viorel Cosma. “Muzicienii români: compozitori și muzicologi” (*Romanian Musicians: Composers and Musicologists*, Musical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1970, pp. 64-65.

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Georg Berger, interview published in Laura Manolache – “Șase portrete de compozitori români” (*Six Portraits of Romanian Composers*), Musical Publishing House, București, 2002, p. 20.

a conductor, making his debut at one of the editions of the International Chamber Music Festival in Braşov. A fortuitous circumstance brings him to the conductor's podium of the Chamber Orchestra of the Braşov Philharmonic, substituting for the Madrigal Choir concert. Also, one cannot forget Berger's work as a mentor. Remarkable personalities of the interpretative art, such as the members of the Voces Quartet, obtained inspiration from the knowledge generously shared by the maestro. For his whole activity and the contribution brought to the Romanian culture, Berger was distinguished with prizes by the Romanian Academy (1966 and 1985), UCMR (1967, 1974, 1977, 1981, 1985, 1990), Order of Cultural Merit, 4th Class (1967), 3rd Class (1969), 2nd Class (1974) and Order of 23 August (1979)<sup>8</sup>.

Trained as a violist, Berger dedicates a series of compositions to this instrument, 4 concertos<sup>9</sup> and 4 sonatas<sup>10</sup>, where the viola has different partners. Thus, the *Sonata for Viola and Cello op. 18*, composed in 1962, is relevant in the context of the topic for this study. The Sonata is a 4-part cycle, *Fantasia, Recitativo, Arioso, and Fugue*, like Bach's *Suites for solo cello* or *the Suites and Partitas for solo violin*. Even if the titles of the parts do not follow a pattern, they maintain a sequence based on the principle of contrast and alternation.

Part I (*Fantasia*) is cast in the pattern of a tripartite lied with a refrain, A-B-A. Even though the form is classically inspired, it is approached in a free manner, incorporating numerous elements of improvisation. Considering that the imitative technique is widely employed, an affinity with the genre of the two-voice invention, as known from J. S. Bach, can be observed. The melodic lines that open Part I are accompanied by the viola's "corda da recita" on the sixth and seventh degrees of the mixolydian mode, supporting the cello, and vice versa, with the cello's counterpoint on the viola's theme. In the median section, there is a turnaround of the main viola melody, while the cello counterpoints with a flow of triplets which, because of their manner of performance, spiccato, creates a powerful colorful effect. The violent dynamic contrast between the main melodic line in unison at *pp* and the erupting isorhythm in *ff* marks the culmination of the section.

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<sup>8</sup> Viorel Cosma, *Muzicieni din România. Lexicon bio-bibliografic, (Musicians from Romania: Bio-bibliographic Lexicon)* vol. I, Musical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1989, p. 121.

<sup>9</sup> *Concert no. 1 for viola and orchestra op. 12* (1959), *Concert no. 2 for viola and orchestra op. 16* (1961), *Concert for violin, viola and orchestra op. 55* (1978) and *Solo Concert for viola op. 94* (1990) (<https://rama.org.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Berger-lista-lucrari-cronologic.pdf>).

<sup>10</sup> *Sonata for viola and piano op. 3* (1957), *Sonata for viola and cello op. 18* (1962), *Sonata for flute, viola, and cello op. 27* (1965), *Sonata for solo viola op. 35* (1968) (<https://rama.org.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Berger-lista-lucrari-cronologic.pdf>).

From a harmonic perspective, the first movement exposes numerous chords and progressions that are perfectly tonal, yet their superimposition goes beyond the traditional line. Thus, the B major chord overlaid on C-sharp minor or the sequence A-flat minor – E-flat minor superimposed on G mixolydian are notable. Also, in the reprise, the theme presented by the cello takes on a dodecaphonic-serial aspect.<sup>11</sup>

The rhythmic-metric analysis reveals an abundance of contrasts. Rhythmic formulas in regular subdivisions arranged complementarily in the lines of the two instruments, unfold in a diversified metric. Thus, we find measures of 5/8, 6/8, 2/8, 3/8, 4/8, and the binary-ternary alternation present in this part frequently appears from one measure to another. The rhythmic construction system based on the complementarity principle has its roots in Bach's polyphony and facilitates the highlighting of voices, while the rhythmic variety resulting from the succession of alternative measures avoids repetitiveness and symmetry.

The title that Berger gives to the first part of the sonata can be considered an allusion to the genre addressed throughout the history of music, such as Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy* and *Fugue*, Beethoven's *Fantasy* op. 77, Mozart's *Fantasy in Re minor K 397* and *in Do minor K 475*, or the romantic fantasies of Schumann and Chopin. However, the language and sound organization leave the traditional sphere.

The second part, *Recitativo*, has a tripartite form of the contrabasso type, ABB. The three sections have different tempo indications, ranging from *Allegro moderato*, lively with dramatic effects, to *Meno mosso* in the first section B, and *Calmo* in the second section B. The transition, from bursts of the motif of destiny (Fate-motif), with the augmentation of durations (in sixteenths on the viola, in quarters on the cello), to the unison of the two instruments and the separation from unison into two complementary melodic lines, establishes a calm that sets the stage for the poetic atmosphere of the upcoming section, *Arioso*.

From a harmonic point of view, *Recitativo* has a transparent and linear aspect, with one moment marked by chords in the climax. Certainly, the intervals that make up the diminished seventh chord with an added sixth disturb the third and sixth consonants that precede and follow it. The presence of the minor third (mi-sol) that transforms into a major third (with the appearance of A flat, enharmonically equivalent to G sharp) creates a state of ambiguity and minor-major conflict, contributing to maintaining tension alongside the strongly contrasting dynamics (pp-fff). The composer's preference for melodic scales always searching for stable pillars is noteworthy.

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<sup>11</sup> G-A-A flat -E flat-D-E-F sharp-C-D-E flat-B-E.

This choice generates a type of “infinite melody” which, although tensioned, ensures the fluency of the recitative.

The *Recitativo* is constructed rhythmically from waves with a double direction. Thus, tension relief and tensioning are achieved through the distribution of metric accents (7/4, 6/4, 5/4, 4/4, 3/4, 2/4, 1/4, and vice versa) and the wide dynamic range (ff → p and vice versa). In the middle section, the first B, we find the melodic line in compound unison composed of eighth notes assimilated to the syllables of the declamation. We observe that eighths, as both regular and exceptional divisions, create subtle nuances in the discourse.

The third movement, *Arioso*, is characterized by a distinctly melodious melodic line in a restrained tempo. Moreover, Berger's tempo indication, *Larghetto, lirico e calmo*, is eloquent regarding the desired character. *Arioso* is the type that can replace a preceding *Recitativo* before an *Aria* or can be preceded by a *Recitativo*.<sup>12</sup> Even if it is specific to the opera, we can also find it in instrumental music, such as *Sonata for piano op. 110* by Beethoven, as a third movement preceding *Fugue*<sup>13</sup>.

The sound construction follows the pattern of a tripartite lied form, ABA, where B is divided into three microsections. The cantilena, as the main melodic line, is presented by the cello, while the viola indicates a complementary contrapuntal line. The main melodic line of section B is divided between the cello (in the first microsection of B) and the viola (in the second microsection), following the principle of imitation. The ending of the section starts similarly to the exposition, but the roles of the two instruments are reversed. Then, the music fades away through motivic fragmentation and dynamic decrease.

From a harmonic perspective, *Arioso* outlines latently some chords generated by the polyphonic interweaving of voices. The A-flat chord, with two-thirds (C-flat, C), enriched with melodic and chromatic notes, is present throughout the entire first section. The middle section unfolds based on a sequence of chords with dual valence (major-minor) derived from mixtures of sixths and thirds in the viola's counterpoint. The culmination of the part is marked by a C major chord with an augmented second and augmented fourth added. The tension relaxes throughout the recapitulation towards A-flat major through the fifth A-flat to E-flat in the final part.

The rhythm of the movement is related to that of Bach in the *Aria from Suite No. 3 for Orchestra*, where the eighth note is the unit of time. In Berger's work, however, the meter is highly varied (2/8, 3/8, 3/16, 4/16), expressing an asymmetry that suggests the vocal nature of the music. Unlike the square

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<sup>12</sup> Leoncavallo, *Paiate (Pagliacci)* act I.

<sup>13</sup> Dumitru Bughici, “Dicționar de forme și genuri muzicale” (*Dictionary of Musical Forms and Genres*), Muzicală Publishing House, Bucharest, 1978, p. 20

structures of instrumental phraseology, vocal singing phrases physiologically depending on breathing. The ornamental Baroque character is present throughout the part, with the eighth note supporting a remarkable variety of subdivisions and groupings. Melodic continuity is perfect, the succession of rhythmic formulas is complementary, and polyphonic dialogues stand out, although the sonic texture is loaded with ornamental notes.

The *Fugue* concludes the cycle of movements that make up the *Sonata for Viola and Cello, Op. 18*. The form is that of a simple fugue, and the fugue's pattern is as found in the masterpiece that served as its model, Bach's *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*: exposition, episode 1, recapitulation, episode 2, recapitulation, episode 3, recapitulation 4, final recapitulation, epilogue. The intervallic relationships between themes and responses are dissonant, with an augmented fifth and a diminished fifth, and their exposition occurs in the bass-alto and tenor-soprano tandems, respectively. The treatment of thematic material in the reprisals is based on various procedures, ranging from simple exposition to rhythmic diminution, condensing the four measures into one, or unison. The episodes are based on extractions from the counterpoint of the first response, and elaborations of thematic motives in terms of intervals, instrumentation, or dynamics. The interesting aspect is episode 2, which introduces new material and, in terms of the affect theory in Baroque music, assimilates the "sighing motive."

The tradition-modernism opposition is also reflected at a harmonic level. The vertical elements reveal unique harmonic constructions that tend to blur the distinction between consonance and dissonance but mark the unfolding of polyphony horizontally. The four voices construct, in the exposition, a G major seventh chord with an augmented fifth, due to the D sharp at the first entry of the viola. We can note Berger's predilection for inversions and added notes, as well as the minor-major balance he creates, which leads to strange sonorities or profound instability, especially when accompanied by extreme dynamic indications.

Analyzing from a modal perspective, we observe that the melodic structures are based on dodecaphonic series, without being overly strict. For example, the theme uses the series G, A-flat, G-flat, F, D, E, D-sharp, C, B, G, B, in which the note G is repeated. The response appears when the theme series is not yet exhausted, thus identifying only the following eight notes: D-sharp, E, F, D, C-sharp, A-sharp, C, A. The themed series exposed by the tenor consists of seven notes: B, C-sharp, D, B-flat, A, F-flat, D-sharp, while the response's series consists of: F, G, B-flat, E, D-sharp, B, G-sharp. It can be assumed, thus, that the exposition contains, "in nuce" (obviously), the idea of stretto. Additionally, it is observed that, by extracting the first note of each thematic beginning, the structure G, B, D sharp, F, is obtained, often encountered throughout the fugue, either in the horizontal or vertical plane.

According to Bach's tradition, long rhythmic values found in this movement lead to the conclusion they are part of the vocal fugues, which are based on a "cantus firmus" type line. The full note the fugue starts with, the gradual decrease of the durations, and the fragmentation through pauses create a space fit to highlight the counterpoint of the theme. Moreover, the entire rhythmic tableau of the fugue is complementary, the technique allowing the highlighting of polyphonic layers. Unlike the preceding movements, the fugue uses relatively few types of durations, but their combination is extremely varied. Also, in contrast with the first three movements, the metric remains unchanged (4/4) until the *Epilogo*, which quotes thematic elements extracted from all four movements and enunciates them in reverse order.

## Conclusions

Berger developed his system of composition, in which the musical discourse generated by a modern modal language is organized into Baroque and Classical structures. Counterpoint is one of the frequently and skillfully used techniques in polyphonic constructions, with the composer consistently assigning special importance to the melodic factor. The scope and monumentality that characterize his work are derived from a profound understanding of structural tradition, reflected in the combination of fixed forms with improvisational ones. Consistently concerned with order and systematization, Wilhelm Georg Berger has always balanced discourse on music with creativity in composition. As he said himself: "The composition focuses on the science and intuition of the music inventor to impart expression, beauty, communicative power, and artistic meaning to a sonorous material permeated and dominated by the spirit of necessary order and, in its essence, potentially exploitable through acts of creation."<sup>14</sup>

I used the *Sonata for viola and cello op. 18* for analysis because the highlighted elements fully reflect the combination of tradition and modernism. The construction in the form of a cycle, similar to Baroque suites and partitas, the titles of the movements, their arrangement in this order, and the chosen forms for each of them constitute the framework in which Berger elaborated a musical discourse based on a modern language using serial technique applied to modes, polytonality, novel instrumental and timbral combinations, diverse sonorities achieved through strongly contrasting dynamics, and the extreme registers of the instruments.

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<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Georg Berger, *Dimensiuni modale (Modal Dimensions)*, Musical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1979, p. 271.



The deepening, adaptation, and utilization of a specific thought model demonstrate the high level of combinatorial complexity in Berger's oeuvre. Like many other composers in 20th century, Berger did not identify himself with a specific modern music movement because his synthetic nature did not fit into a single stylistic direction<sup>15</sup>, but blending the traditional with the modern gave his compositions a character of unity in diversity.

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<sup>15</sup> Octavian Lazăr Cosma, „Simfoniile lui Wilhelm G. Berger. Considerații stilistice” in *Studii de muzicologie IV (Wilhelm Georg Berger's Symphonies. Stylistic Considerations in Studies of Musicology IV)*, Bucharest, Musical Publishing House, 1979

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