

AN EVOCATION OF ION VIDU 150 YEARS AFTER HIS BIRTH. HIS ACTIVITY AS A COMPOSER AND AS A CONDUCTOR

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SUMMARY. Towards the end of the year 2013 the birth of the composer Ion Vidu will be marked by the commemoration of the 150 years that have passed. A memorable figure of the musical scene from Banat, the founder and promoter of the Orthodox choral movement for which Banat is known even internationally, Ion Vidu can righteously be defined as a most complex cultural personality whose legacy entitles him to be called a canonical composer for the history of the Romanian choral music and a remarkable conductor, teacher, publicist and organizer of the cultural life in Banat in general and of the choral movement in the same area in particular. Thus, in this commemorative year, this paper sets out to highlight yet again not a general portrait of Ion Vidu (in which case the risk of a shallow approach would be very high), but the two most common dimensions of his personality: Ion Vidu, the composer and the conductor.

Keywords: Ion Vidu, Romanian Choral Music, Choral Music from Banat, Culture in Banat.

A composer, conductor, music teacher, publicist, patriot and, on the whole, a great animator of the cultural life in Banat, Ion Vidu – whose birth 150 years ago is commemorated in 2013² – is rightfully placed among the great personalities of Orthodox choral music in Banat. This music field has chorally reflected – during the composer's life and especially after his death, due to his influence – quite exactly and rigidly the Orthodox Music of Byzantine Tradition in Western Romania, also known as music „of Banat” or, in Arad region, “of Lugoj” which was named as such after Trifon Lugojan, the one who noted it and which is nothing else but an appropriation of the Byzantine music by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

It is known the fact that Ion Vidu began to experiment in the composition field – ever since he was a student – with creating new and varied

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² The composer Ion Vidu is born in 17. XII. 1863 in Mănerău (a small village in the Habsburgic Empire at that time, Arad County of Romania at present time) from romanian parents.

musical forms and genres, being driven by his urge for knowledge and development. However, these ventures were also characterised by the hesitations and not-yet-developed skills inherent to any beginning period³, a period which is linked to the city of Arad where Vidu studied at the *Preparandia*⁴ and gained insight into the musical subjects by studying Church Music.

In the years that followed, Ion Vidu thoroughly studied these necessary subjects for future composers in Caransebes with professor Nicky Popovici and then in Iasi with Master Gavriil Musicescu, through musicological subjects adjacent to the Music Forms domain, namely Music Harmony and Music Theory.

If one looks at the composer's religious creation only, which is obviously characterised by routes of going back to the archetypes of the Church Music of Byzantine Tradition in Banat⁵, one could be tempted to claim that Ion Vidu did not reach a very advanced level in the composition area. But if one observes the other side of Vidu's creation, i.e. the laic one, where he elaborately processed certain folkloric creations according to the norms of classical music⁶, and also certain musical moments in his religious music, one can clearly understand the true composing religious vision of Vidu: in his own creations or in the case of processing already existing religious music, Vidu considered that most important was the processing of the existing material, but this compositional processing should be done in such a way that the material is not irreversibly affected regarding its belonging to authentic Music of Byzantine Tradition from Banat, thus avoiding the transformation of a composition from authentic music into music inspired from the Orthodox Music of Byzantine Tradition from Banat⁷.

³ Vidu's desire of knowledge and development in the musical field was so big that shortly after coming to *Preparandia* he would try to compose something similar to the Classical Fantasy, the Sonata and even Oratorio – some fragments are still preserved – see: Cosma, Viorel, *Un maestru al muzicii corale. Viața compozitorului Ion Vidu (A master of Choral Music. The Life of the composer Ion Vidu)*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1965, pp. 21 – 22.

⁴ *Preparandia* was the Pedagogical – Theological highschool for Orthodox Romanians in Banat, where future Orthodox priests and confessional primary teachers for the Romanian communities in Banat, Arad and Bihor were schooled.

⁵ Florea, Avram, *Creația Corală Românească din Banat Perioada Interbelică. Între prelucrarea sursei folclorice și bizantine și creația originală (The Romanian Choral Creation in Banat during the Interbellum Period. The axis between adapting a folkloric or byzantine source and creating an original)*, Editura Mirton, Timișoara, 2004, pp. 37 – 45.

⁶ A good example for that is the third part from *Răsunetul Ardealului (Ardeal's Echo)* which, even though it preserves the characteristics of a folkloric adaptation (see: Cosma, Viorel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 195), can be characterised as a true *fugue* due to the technique of voice leading in the melody.

⁷ The composer himself claimed the importance of preserving authentic Church music of Byzantine tradition in Banat and stated in the preface of his *Cântări Vechi Funebrale (Old Funeral Chants)*: „I gather here the chants of our ancestors which they sang at funerals. The stubborn conservation

Although Vidu's attempts at composition dates back to his high school years in *Preparandia*, his debut proper started in 1888 when he moved to Lugoj as a music teacher at the Romanian Confessional School and as a conductor for the Romanian Reunion of Songs in Lugoj. Maybe the most dramatic experience of his new status was that of meeting the choir he was going to conduct starting then, and this was because ever since the first meeting Ion Vidu realised a flagrant reality, that of the clear difference in the mentality between his choir singers and himself. This difference was made up of an image which showed, on the one hand, a very patriotic conductor (as Vidu proved to be in his love for folklore music), and on the other, a slightly altered national conscience in what the choir singers were concerned.

The latter can be explained socially and historically by the fact that in a town such as Lugoj which had been thoroughly "Germanized"⁸, the Romanians in the choir The Reunion of Songs mostly sang foreign songs, the same as the ones sung in the Hungarian or German Reunions present in the town⁹ since they thought that the ethnic specificity which they had to highlight was showing directly from their interpretive style by which they presented the repertoire¹⁰.

Far from being just a small conflict of visions, this state of the matter led to problems from the very first rehearsal when, due to the fact that Vidu introduced the song "*Din șezătoare*" to be studied, the choristers were extremely irritated by the fact that the conductor tried to bend their repertoire with "*mocăniile*" from *Dealul Viilor*¹¹, an ironic and mocking name given to the local folklore music. Ion Vidu himself later bitterly noted that he had had to give up the song in order not to have the rehearsal room empty¹².

instinct of the people of Lugoj kept them unaltered until today..." (see: Vidu, Ion, *Cântări Vechi Funerale (Old Funeral Chants)*, Editura Diecenzană, Caransebeș, 1904, preface).

⁸ As in most towns in Transylvania and Banat of those times, in Lugoj the classical German music was known ever since the beginning of the 18th century, especially in the superior social layers where the German ethnics were numerous. Thus the German music gained a prestige which caused the members of the Romanian Reunion for Songs in Lugoj to become attached to that kind of music. (see: Vancea, Zeno, *Creația muzicală românească în secolele XIX și XX (Romanian Musical creation in the 19th and 20th centuries)*, Vol I, II, Editura Muzicală, București, 1968, p. 169.)

⁹ Brie, Pr. Mihai, Crâmpoie din viața și activitatea compozitorului Ion Vidu (Moments of Ion Vidu's life and activity) in: *Altarul Reîntregirii (Journal)*, Nr. 1 / 2008, Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă din Alba Iulia, Alba Iulia, 2008, p. 96.

¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹ A hill situated at the northern periphery of Lugoj and a mocking sintagm towards the folk music of that area which was considered to be inferior by the members of the Reunion (Stan, Constantin – Tufan, *uniunea Română de Cântări și Muzică la Corul Ion Vidu. 1810 – 2010 (From the Romanian Reunion for Songs and Music to the Ion Vidu Choir. 1810 - 2010)*, Editura Eurostampa Timișoara, 2010, pp. 41 – 42.)

¹² Cosma, Viorel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

The artistic vision of the choir was soon to be modified due to two major events at the beginning of Vidu's conducting career: the first was a reorganisation of the choir when a significant number of simple people – peasants and workers from Lugoj – were intentionally brought to the choir because they would have been, in Vidu's view, more receptive to a future approach of songs from the folkloric repertoire in Banat¹³. The second event was the July 1890 visit of the Metropolitan Choir from Iasi – choir conducted by Gavriil Musicescu – which had in their repertoire not less than six Romanian folkloric songs, all sung in Lugoj and heard by the members of the Lugoj choir¹⁴. These folkloric songs were like a sparkle of enthusiasm for the choir singers in Lugoj, who, starting then began to adopt and adapt (with the help of Vidu himself) Romanian folkloric melodies.

These events, together with Vidu's great wish of perfecting his musical skills in general and his composition ones in particular, made him ask on September 2nd 1890 the Greek-Oriental Romanian Parish in Lugoj for a one-year paid leave in order to study the Conservatoire in Iasi with his master, Musicescu.

His request for the paid leave was accepted, albeit with some restraints, among which was the condition that after Vidu would return to Lugoj as a teacher and as a conductor of the Reunion choir, he would not be allowed to quit for at least five years¹⁵ during which he would have the same salary. Taking into consideration the fact that Vidu saw this opportunity to study as a dream come true, one can imagine the seriousness, the joy and the devotion with which he pursued the musical studies with his Master Gavriil Musicescu. Once he arrived in Iasi, having a scholarship at the Conservatoire and free accommodation and meals at the Metropolitan establishment¹⁶, Vidu dedicated all his attention to study, a fact which is proven by the written appreciation on his diplomas. Not only the thorough study is characteristic for this period, but also the development of a close contact with the musical world in Iasi, a process which evolved through the rehearsals and the concerts of the Metropolitan Choir and through the rehearsals of the Conservatoire Orchestra¹⁷.

We can state that Vidu's stay in Iasi defined his evolution towards a musically mature level of his life, because from then onwards he gained experience in the academic musical field, together with his native musical

¹³ *Idem*, p. 40.

¹⁴ *Idem*, pp. 46 – 48.

¹⁵ Stan, Constantin – Tufan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 42.

¹⁶ This special „treatment” were ensured by the intervention of Musicescu himself (see: Cosma, Viorel, *Op. Cit.*, p. 50.)

¹⁷ Popovici, Doru, *Preste Deal. Viața compozitorului Ion Vidu (Over the hill. The life of the composer Ion Vidu*, Editura Facla, Timișoara, 1980, pp. 50 – 52.

sensitivity and his theoretical knowledge in the domain. This academic environment enabled him to reach very high standards regarding his theoretical knowledge since this is of an utter importance in an art such as music which, being temporal, does not offer the opportunity to correct one's mistakes during a performance since that moment is the very time of its unique existence. This is why the period spent in Iasi represented a personal achievement for the composer but also for the cultural community in Lugoj due to the fact that it had gained a member who, having already studied very hard individually could now devote his free time to serving the true cultural needs of his society.

Once he came back to Lugoj, Vidu did not stop only at raising the bar for his choir, but he also started new choirs or consolidated the already existing ones made up of Romanian peasants¹⁸. He did this as he was aware of the power of music to carry ideas and to transmit them in a much more intimate and profound way than the usual language and also because he probably wanted to awaken the national conscience and the faith in the hearts of his co-nationals.

These preoccupations materialised – as a power of example – in numerous concerts of the Romanian Reunion of Songs from Lugoj on Banat territory and abroad.

Another significant preoccupation of Vidu was the lack of a Romanian repertoire. He continued to collect and adapt folkloric music and this work materialised in many choral "jewels" such as *Ana Lugojana*, *Răsunetul Ardealului* or *Răsunetul Crișanei* which were published in 1899 in *Severina*¹⁹ collection and which are still sung by many choirs nowadays.

On the religious music level we need to note Vidu's first "victory" against his choir singers, who, impressed by the religious repertoire of the Metropolitan Choir from Iasi presented in their visit in 1890, gave up the foreign composers' Liturgies and joined the Romanian religious repertoire, first adopting Musicescu's Liturgy²⁰ and then works composed by Vidu himself.

This was maybe the impulse that determined Vidu to compose his delicate religious music such as *Liturghia pentru cor mixt (The Liturgy for mixt choir)*, *Liturghia pentru cor bărbătesc (The Liturgy for men's choir)* or *Cântările Funebrele (The Funeral Chants)* or to harmonize certain carols and religious songs such as *Mântuire (Redemption)* or *Troparul Paștilor (The Easter Chant)*, adapted for seven-harmonies mixt choir²¹.

¹⁸ Cosma, Viorel, *Muzicieni Români. Lexicon (Romanian Musicians. A Lexicon)*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1970, p. 452.

¹⁹ The *Severina* collection was published in Budapest in 1899; (see: Cosma, Viorel, *Idem*, p. 452.)

²⁰ Stan, Constantin – Tufan *Op. Cit.*, p. 44.

²¹ Brie, Pr. Mihai, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 99 – 100.

During the hard days of deportation in Sopron (Hungary) the passion for music did not leave Vidu, instead, it soothed his homesickness and maybe strengthened his faith in redemption. In the years of political detention Vidu wrote *Irmosul Întâmpinării* (*The Greeting Irmos*), the hymn *Născătoare de Dumnezeu Fecioară* (*Blessed Mary*) and the first drafts of the Liturgy for mixt choir which would be completed in ten years' time²².

After he was released from political detention, Vidu led the delegation of the Romanian Reunion of Songs from Lugoj to the national gathering at Alba Iulia in December 1st 1918²³. This gives us an insight into how much Vidu was involved in the national issues of his people and how big was his love for his nation.

The last years of his life (1928 – 1931) were full of creative activities: having accumulated a lot of experience and being exigent with his own creations, he went so far as redrafting some of his works for the third time so that they could be republished²⁴. Therefore, these last three years were not spent resting or relaxing, but actively engaging in the Romanian musical scene.

In 1930, at the request of the Diocese of Oltenia, Vidu held a six-week course at the Cozia Monastery for men's choir conductors from Oltenia²⁵. It is notable the fact that this course enriched not only the conductors – disciples but also the composer himself because it was here that Vidu thought of composing a Liturgy for men's choir based on traditional pew chants, a Liturgy which he would complete just months before his death²⁶.

Ion Vidu the composer played his entire work on one card: that of affectionate simplicity. We say *simplicity* because the compositional techniques used are mainly based on simple musical procedures (although it is important to mention that these techniques are not exclusively used) and *affectionate* because Vidu uses as a prime compositional material two musical layers which certainly belong to the hearts of all the members of his community: The Orthodox Church Music of Byzantine Tradition from Banat and Folk and Patriotic Music from Western Romania.

²² Cosma, Viorel, *Ion Vidu. Un maestru al muzicii corale (Ion Vidu. A Master of Choral Music)*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1865 pp. 109 – 130.

²³ Stan, Constantin – Tufan, *Op. Cit.*, p. 88.

²⁴ Brie, Pr. Mihai, *Op. cit.*, p. 104.

²⁵ Popovici, Doru, *Op. cit.*, p. 169.

²⁶ Cosma, Viorel, *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

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