

SONATA FOR CLARINET SOLO BY TIBERIU OLAH

RĂZVAN METEA¹

SUMMARY. "A man of short stature, but with tremendous force of communicating by means of sounds; modest, but aware of his own value; secluded and slightly detached from the practical aspects of existence, but proving, in everything connected with the art of sounds, an inexhaustible energy and passion, an amazing capacity of observation and synthesis, unparalleled culture and memory as well as extraordinary precision and exigency. Apparently, Olah led an ordinary life, among us; in fact, music permeated his life as an uninterrupted ostinato, to the point of identification with it, in symbiotic communion. His personality takes prominent shape even from his first works: a strong lyrical nucleus, intense dramatism and contaminating kinetic energy " (Olguța Lupu - March 2010²).

Keywords: composition, sculpture, form, interpretation.

About the composer

The work of composer Tiberiu Olah (1927-2002) is characterized by a diversity of the approached genres, his activity being crowned with remarkable success. He studied at the Music Academy in Cluj-Napoca (1946-1949) and attended composition courses at the "P.I. Tchaikovsky" Conservatory in Moscow (1949-1954) with Professor Evgheni Messner, having among his colleagues: Denisov, Holopov, Rojdestvenski, Volkonski etc.

He attended numerous training courses and received creation and research scholarships, among which we mention: courses of electronic music - the "Siemens" Foundation in München – 1966; Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, Darmstadt: 1967-1969; creation course (composer-in-residence) in the Berliner Künstler programm, West Berlin (1969-1970); creation course on the subject of musical time and space as a guest of DAAD (Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst), West Berlin – 1978-1979.

He became professor of orchestration and composition at the National University of Music in Bucharest (1954-2001) and Doctor of Musical Arts - 1978, in Cluj-Napoca, with the thesis "Unele probleme în legătură cu timpul și spațiul muzical" ("Certain Aspects in Connection with Musical Time and Space").

¹ The *Gheorghe Dima* Music Academy of Cluj-Napoca, 25th Ion I.C. Brătianu Street, Cluj-Napoca, 400079, PhD Lecturer Professor, E-mail: r_metea@yahoo.com

² <http://www.tiberiuolah.ro/lucrari.html>, visited on December 10, 2011.

He composed more than 120 works, covering all musical genres (symphonic, vocal-symphonic, cameral, choral, film music, stage music etc.). Historical events, visual arts as well as literature are but a few of his subjects of meditation later transposed into sonorous images.

In order to justify these affirmations and facilitate the understanding of the composer's preoccupations, an informative enumeration of his works is required. Among them we mention: *Sonatina pentru pian – Sonatina for Piano* (1950)³; *Cvartetul de coarde – The String Quartet* (1952); *Sonatina pentru vioară și pian – Sonatina for Violin and Piano* (1953), which obtained the award of the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania; *Trio pentru vioară, clarinet și pian – Trio for Violin, Clarinet and Piano* (1954); *Simfonia I – Symphony I* (his Bachelor's thesis), *II, III* (1955, 1986, 1989); *Cantata pe vechi versuri ciangăiești – Cantata on Old Csango Lyrics* (1956), which obtained a prize at the Youth Festival in Moscow (1957); *Echinocții – Equinoxes* (1957); the cantata *Prind visele aripi – Dreams get Wings*, on lyrics by Maria Banuș (1959); the oratorio *Constelația Omului – Constellation of Man*, on lyrics by Maiakovski (1960); the Brâncuși cycle - *Coloana infinitului – The Endless Column* (1963), work which obtained the Koussewitzky prize for recording (1967-68), *Sonata pentru clarinet solo – Sonata for Clarinet Solo* (1963), *Spațiu și ritm – Space and Rhythm* (1964), *Poarta sărutului – The Gate of Kiss* (1965), *Masa tăcerii – Table of Silence* (1968); *Traduceri I, II – Translations I, II* (1968, 1973); *Perspective – Perspectives* (1969); *Sonata pentru violoncel solo – Sonata for Cello Solo* (1970); *Simfonia pentru orchestră de coarde – Symphony for String Orchestra* (1970); *Invocații I, II – Invocations I, II* (1971, 1975); *Armonii I, II, III, IV – Harmonies I, II, III, IV* (1975, 1976, 1978, 1981) etc. He also wrote film music, ballet and choreographic transpositions among which we mention *Răscoala – The Rebellion* (1965), *Mihai Viteazul* (1970), *Pe aici nu se trece – Trespassing Forbidden* (1975), *Poarta sărutului – The Gate of Kiss* and *Coloana fără sfârșit – The Neverending Column* in the choreographic version of Vasile Marcu etc.

Musical analysis

Sonata for Clarinet Solo was dedicated to the renowned clarinet player Aurelian Octav Popa and is the second work from the cycle entitled *Omagiu lui Brâncuși – Homage to Brâncuși*, cycle representing a defining turning point of style in his creation⁴.

³ Composed during his time at the Conservatory in Moscow (in the class of Professor Messner).

⁴ "The event of the evening was the Sonata for clarinet solo by Tiberiu Olah. This work filled with surprising effects proves, on the one hand, that the author is familiar with all the possibilities of the clarinet and, on the other, that the work has been almost modeled on the personality of Popa." (Pernye Andras – In Budapest Concert Halls. The concert of Aurelian Octav Popa, Magyar Nemzet, November 32, 1968).

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The unique, both archaic and modern beauty of Brâncuși's stone sculptures did not lead the composer to establish an exact sonorous parallel or a musical correspondent faithful to the artistic ideas, Olah considering these sculptures as starting points, the initial motive of a musical construction, and not a representation in musical images of Brâncuși's work. The indirect relation between the two arts is very important and even defining for Tiberiu Olah's way of thinking, as he was less interested in revealing surface elements, even when well defined and suggestive, being more preoccupied to disclose the hidden essence of the phenomenon, even when it was more difficult to detect. The contact points of the five pieces, apart from the suggestion of Brâncuși, are unnoticeable directly, at the structural and musical level, although they are very important: a pattern of common "durations" built from a sequence of numbers in different combinations, very complex melodic built from a simple melodic cell, resembling a bucium signal, the composer's own variational technique etc. In building the unity of the cycle on a more complex level, together with the values mentioned above, we also notice various orchestral colour formulae as well as a series of procedures of melodic ornamentation of the "pattern of duration".

Roman Vlad considers this work as "one of the best compositions for clarinet in the world", its inspiration source being Brâncuși's *Pasărea măiastră – Majestic Bird*⁵.

Fig. 1



Constantin Brâncuși: *Pasărea măiastră – Majestic Bird*

⁵ "I listened then to a remarkable Sonata for clarinet unaccompanied by Tiberiu Olah, one of the best works in the world that have been written for this solo instrument." (Roman Vlad - On Romania and Romanian Music, Tribuna, Cluj-Napoca, October 8, 1964).

Tiberiu Olah tries to create an imaginary world using poetic associations musically rendered, stating, at the same time, that his music is, in general, subjective and cannot be expressed in words.

By the term "*Sonata*", the composer does not refer to placing the musical discourse within the classical perimeter of form, but to the continuous development of musical ideas having as a common ethos Brâncuși's cycle: static-dynamic, polyphonic-monophonic, melismatic-giusto.

The entire work progresses slowly, from the simple to the complex, using an extensive pallet of musical elements. Music suggests lyricism and agility realized in subtle and cursive dialectics, otherwise necessary for the plastic unity of the masterpiece as it is described by Brâncuși himself: "a symbol of the flight liberating man from within the limits of dead matter. [...] even the contradictory forms must unite in a final unity"⁶. Therefore, a new open form emerged, like Brâncuși's Column, but the paradigm of variations needed a solid architectonic platform.

Associated with the structure of sonata, imagined as a formal archetype (that is, the chaining of three sections), the work has an ascending progress, corresponding to realizing the final unity, based on the contrasts previously mentioned. Consequently, the final form will take shape from the permanent alternation, intercalation, overlapping and variation of contrasts with discontinuous elements resulted from the same generating nucleus and belonging to the same emotional area as the impetuous melodic pattern played by the clarinet in the beginning of the piece.

The work consists of one part where the composer uses almost all the expressive and technical possibilities of the clarinet⁷ and contains three relatively flexible sections. The sections allow for an analysis based on continuous, very dramatic, unique movement, but with exact delimitations of certain areas where the composer articulates certain segments of form (the exposition or the fugue-type construction). The work begins with an opposition short-long describing a starting point with explicit references to rhythmic structures of the parlando-rubato type. The two types of duration, in the beginning part of a common structure, evolve gradually, individually, delimitating their own territory. At the end of the first five measures, after the exposition of an 8 sound mode expressed by equal alternation of tone-semitone, the main musical motive takes clear shape. We can notice the dynamic contrast (the first 7 sounds) even from its construction

⁶ <http://www.ceruldinnoi.ro/pages/Brancusi%20-%20Aforisme.htm> (102), visited on December 10, 2011.

⁷ "*Sonata for Clarinet Solo by Olah is a piece of immense interior turmoil, an exploration of the extreme – and apparently only now discovered – limitations of expressivity of the instrument. Popa, a musician of profound understanding of contemporary art, has given Olah's sonata its full meaning*" (Gheciu, Radu, *Muzica de cameră românească (Romanian Chamber Music)*, Informația Bucureștiului, September 18, 1967).

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- static (the final sound), contrast which will stand at the basis of the following musical discourse, by amplification of the modal universe⁸, attracting new sounds; therefore, by the end of the first section (measure 108), from the chromatic total of 12 sounds, we will have 11. The combination of short sounds followed by long sounds can be associated with the Romanian *doina*, the metric subdivisions having a folkloric character. Due to the fact that the rhythmic and melodic formulae permanently evolve without repeating themselves, the work does not appear as a folkloric piece.

Ex. 1

During his career, Tiberiu Olah has personified the concept of space in music, through different variants of echo effects, oscillating the musical registers of the musical discourse in different octaves.

⁸ "The same expansive modalism generates the material for the Sonata for Clarinet Solo by Tiberiu Olah, a work of extraordinary vigor and expressivity whose valences have been brightly and profoundly rendered by Aurelian Octav Popa." (Marbe, Myriam, *Festivalul George Enescu. Muzica românească de cameră (The George Enescu Festival. Romanian Chamber Music)*, Scânteia, Bucharest, September 21, 1967).

The second section (measures 109-146) begins with a fugato⁹ where monody unveils its polyphonic valences and the polychromy emerging from the virtuosity of the interpreter makes the mono-timbral quality of the clarinet questionable. Following the elusion of the long sounds (the static element), the musical discourse will concentrate on movement, in its evolution from discontinuity to the fluidity of a discourse on two planes. Therefore, several voices can be identified, leaving the impression that there are several instruments playing, instead of just one. Moreover, this feeling is deepened by the multitude of nuances and registers.

Ex. 2

⁹ "Most impressive was the sonata for clarinet by Tiberiu Olah. The work is atonal, structurally clear with a cleverly designed fugue incorporated into the long movement. Olah demonstrates craftsmanship and personality befitting a fine composer" (Schwartz, Francis, *Romanian Musician Masters Changes of Styles*, in: *The San Juan Star*, February 24, 1971).

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The theme appearing in *pp* is followed by a response for descending seventh in *mf* and staccato, accompanied by a counter-subject in *p dolce*. Due to these strong nuances, the two voices are very well differentiated. After the end of the response, the third theme appears, at the same interval of descending seventh, in *f* and with *slap tongue*, accompanied by a counter-subject in *mp legato*. We notice that every theme is in a different register, giving the impression of several instruments playing, as we mentioned earlier. We also distinguish the continuous chromaticization of the musical discourse, on different melodic planes, the defining element of this section being the absence of the long notes.

Ex. 3

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff begins with a *p dolce* marking and a descending melodic line. It is followed by a section marked *ff Jubito* with staccato notes. The bottom staff starts with a *piu ff* marking and continues the descending chromatic line, ending with a section marked *ff possibile* and a dashed line indicating a continuation.

Towards the finale, the musical discourse is based on a new static-dynamic confrontation, built from the alternation of rapid and agitated passages with calm, slow melodies, with long notes. In clear contrast with the beginning of the piece (where we have the same static-dynamic confrontation but with emphasis on the static element), the musical discourse of the finale (the final section) is very dynamic, monody describing the musical materialization of flight as deliverance from the state of potentiality. In the end of the sonata a sonorous cluster is produced in the form of a synthesis of rhythmic-modal material as a response to Brâncuși's wish to cover "the canopy of heaven". The composer approaches the theme of flying with musical means through transformations of established structures, permanently refined, with the purpose of obtaining the "form itself", the final glissando highlighting even more the flight of the Majestic Bird towards the sky.

Ex. 4

The image shows a single staff of musical notation. It begins with a *pp eoo* marking and a series of notes. This is followed by a section marked *mf* with a long note. The next section is marked *ff* with a *gliss. - lentamente* instruction. The final section is marked *pp cresc. molto* and ends with a *ff* marking.

Short interpretative analysis

Although conceived during the 6th decade of the 20th century, during the Avant-garde, the work remains a piece of reference, presenting the same technical, instrumental and interpretative difficulties as the works of our time.

The clarinetist, in supporting the musical discourse, is bound to identify:

- Problems of technical difficulty, *digitations*, etc.
- The various means of expression or effects, such as the different types of *vibrato* or articulation - *slap-staccatissimo*, *tenuto* etc.

These elements need to be studied separately and later integrated in the melodic-rhythmic structure.

The sonority is very expressive and very colourful (timbered), while the types of vibrato are different, expressing at the same time the melodic content.

Rhythm is one of the sonorous parameters which are most difficult to sustain during interpretation due to precision and its essential contribution to suggesting polyphony, requiring the enhanced attention of the clarinetist.

Rendering nuances plays a very important role in the musical discourse, also contributing to rendering various expressions, latent polyphony, as well as the colours of the piece.

The problems of agility and virtuosity comprised in the rigorous passages of demisemiquavers and hemidemisemiquavers are resolved by a supplementary preoccupation of the musician, as they are very well anchored in the musical discourse.

Another interpretative dimension of the piece is given by the articulation of sounds and the ways of attack, which require prominent diversity of expression and quality (*tenuto*, *stacc.*, *slap* etc). The *frullatos* and *glissandos* in the end of the piece require masterful execution in order to complete the expressivity of the work (the *glissandos* in the finale resemble "the flight towards the sky" of Brancuși's birds).

The biggest difficulty in interpreting this sonata is represented by the correct and cursive rendering of the musical phrases and their structuring. The cursive and exact rendering of the written text, with all its structural elements, guarantees a good performance.

The tempo is expressed by ♩=380-400, that is ♩=cca 100, fluctuations of tempo being very well established by the author through the agogic indications in the musical text.

All in all, the conclusions of our study can only be succinct, being comprised in the following statement of Luminița Vartolomei:

"Regardless of how spectacular and always very effective the sonorous means are, the music of Tiberiu Olah is essentially marked by profound introversion. The decanting and crystallizing of expression, refined up to

unraveling the essence, according to the ideal of simplicity inspired by the centuries' old experience of Romanian folkloric art, represent the foundation of its irresistible emotional force.”¹⁰

Translated by Roxana-Paula Huza

Notice: “This article (specialty study) is part of the TE research project *The artistic and social impact of the contemporary music of the 21st century from the perspective of the relationship composer-performer-audience* (Project director: Lect.univ.dr. Cristian Bence-Muk), project financed by C.N.C.S.I.S. – U.E.F.I.S.C.S.U. with the contract no. 5/5.08.2010.”

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¹⁰ Luminița Vartolomei - *Surse artistice extra-muzicale (Extra-Musical Artistic Sources)*, 1961, republished in *Stop-cadru în sonor (Stop Frame in the Sonorous)*, Ed. Muzicală, 2002.