

## THE CHORAL FRAMEWORK IN THE OPERA *DECEBAL* BY TEODOR ZGUREANU

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**SUMMARY.** Zgureanu's entire work is influenced by the folkloric ethos. On the whole, the resort to the folkloric substance is one of the constant features of his work. For the most part, he uses rhythmic-melodic elements specific to the folkloric melodicy, elements that draw their essence from the century-long experience of the folk artist that he decants by subjecting them to his own, unmistakable language. The multiple-level contrasts (dynamic, rhythmic, timbral, of registers), the vitality, energy, tension, harshness and density are the main characteristics of this opera, in which we find clarity and self-confidence in composition, build-ups and tensions disrupted by breaks or by contrasting sections, but also a persistency in using melodic-rhythmic cells of folk origin. It is a style the composer has perfected with great toil, characterized also by timbral refinement and subtlety in the game of nuances. The entire structure is built either upon agglomerations or rarefactions, or upon sudden disruptions and contrasts.

**Keywords:** Opera, Teodor Zgureanu, choral framework, Bessarabian opera, *Decebal*.

### Introduction

The entire score is built upon a bipolar arching, according to the principle *arsis*<sup>2</sup> and *thesis*<sup>3</sup>, in which the sound images carry a poetic load that adds to the meanings and density of the poetic text, thus doubling the effect. The work evolves gradually from contemplation to the dramatic and then again to contemplation. In his work, the musical outline takes shape from quasi-relaxation and from the build-up of states of conflict. In a structural sense, the composer institutes his musical languages in obvious morphological units (themes, motifs, musical phrases).

His entire work proves to us the permanent complementarities of the horizontal outline (the melody) with the vertical one (the harmony), parameters meant to ensure the homogeneity and cohesion of the language elements used

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<sup>2</sup> *arsis* – ascent, fulfillment

<sup>3</sup> *thesis* – gloomy, burdening, painful atmosphere

by the composer. We must emphasize here the cohesion and interaction with the other language elements, as well – polyphony, rhythm, meter, etc. – within the entire whole represented by Zgureanu's work. In consequence, these types develop into some of the most important stylistic tools in Zgureanu's work.

By synthesizing, in his own original way, the innovations of universal and contemporary music, Zgureanu has revealed the artistic profoundness of the Romanian musical folklore, by adapting stylistic elements that make a synthesis between the modalism of folk music and the modern intonation trends. The entire language of this opera presents different rapports of the composer towards folkloric creation, from the transfiguration of the authentic melody up to a personal account of the atmosphere characteristic to the national sensitivity.

“In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the acknowledgement of the value of folklore to the composition of opera music deepened even further. The Romanian folklore would thus be imprinted in the conscience of Bessarabian composers, in the monodic and vocal lines, becoming one of the main characteristics of the lyric genre.

Consequently, the gradual character of the autochthonous language was to be clarified, through a musical validation, an outcome that could already be depicted in the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century music.

The variety of sources of musical ideas resulted in a stylistic diversity in the lyric genre. Bessarabian opera reveals two stylistic paradigms that constantly alternate: *tradition* (pertaining to the great stylistic trends from Western European music) and *innovation* (pertaining to the Romanian folklore music).

The originality of the opera works lies in the perception of the sound parameters through folklore. They are characterized by a tonal-modal and modal-chromatic thinking.”(7)

### **The choral framework in the opera *Decebal* by Teodor Zgureanu**

The choruses in Teodor Zgureanu's opera, “Decebal” stand out through their musicality and their authentic power of interiorization, but also through their grandiloquence and drama. They draw their force from both the lyrical, serene, mild climate of ideas, as well as from the majestic, dramatic one.

The beauty of these choruses is of a melodic and harmonic nature. Thanks to a more advanced compositional technique, the composer brings forth an added expressivity and a dramatic or lyrical character, depending on the development of the action. We have to notice the composer's merit in making the melodic line very natural that moulds itself according to the expressivity of the words, as demonstrated especially by the choruses and some arias. The melodies have a folk, even modal nature.

A contribution to the choruses' expressivity is also brought by the differentiated harmonic language, which displays a certain personal touch. The harmony is tonal, modal, either diatonic or, sometimes, with scale degrees that are more or less chromatinized. By using a complex harmonic language and augmented and diminished intervals, Zgureanu emphasizes the moments of maximum expressivity and tension. His contemporary choral writing is based on folkloric music.

The composer proves to be a good specialist in the choral field, using the following procedures:

- A game of timbres: he uses the vocal timbres to their full potential, by alternating the fragments of female voices with the male ones. Through the alternations and blends of voices, he achieved a gradation of colours and contrasts.
- parallel harmonic progression;
- imitation;
- divisions;
- unison;
- successive vocal entries, voice overlaps – thus creating clusters.

Teodor Zgureanu resorts to the following types of chorus:

- a) **cappella** (*Nocturna; Lamento. Dona eis Requiem; The Shepherds' and Shepherdesses' Chorus*) and with **accompaniment** (*Vivat, Vivat; the Soldiers' Oath; Long Live; Hymn to the Dacian Land*). The *a cappella* choruses primarily manage to fill up - acoustically and psychologically – the artistic image, without the orchestral support.
- b) **on equal voices** (*Soldiers' Chorus; Soldiers' Oath*) and **mixed voices** (*Nocturna; Soldiers' Oath; The Shepherds' and Shepherdesses' Chorus; Long live; Lamento. Dona eis Requiem; Hymn to the Dacian Land*).
- c) **harmonic choruses** (*Nocturna; Soldiers' Oath; The Shepherds' and Shepherdesses' Chorus; Long Live*) and **polyphonic choruses** (*Hymn to the Dacian Land*).

We can notice that the “handling” of the choral ensemble is self-assured and the colors, densities, sound fabrics organically intertwine in the entire sound edifice.

In this opera, we can delineate the following types of choral character:

- choruses with an uncomplicated, subtle and expressive character (*Nocturna; The Shepherds' and Shepherdesses' Chorus*); they appear in a sombre, stable manner, without grandiloquence and a wasteful use of effects, creating an expressive climate that pretty much resembles a quasi-hypnotic state. They come to life predominantly in the lyrical fragments.
- choruses with a hymnal character (*Vivat, Vivat; Soldiers' Oath; Long Live; Hymn to the Dacian Land*). Through heroic, celebratory sonorities they accompany the opening or the finalization of a scene.

- choruses with religious themes (*Lamento. Dona eis Requiem*). The composer provides them with a very homogenous, well arched bearing.
- choruses that become a dynamic factor (*Chorus from Decebal's Monologue*); In Zgureanu's view, the vowel represents a proper means of displaying some musical moments, as well as for creating the atmosphere and the acoustic background

The choir is attributed multiple functions, as well, in correspondence with the development of the action. Hence, the choir has the following roles:

- active participant (*Soldiers' Chorus; The Shepherds' and Shepherdesses' Chorus*).
- commentator (*Soldiers' Chorus from the Monologue of Decebal's son and from Vezina's aria*).
- role of sonorous background (*The Chorus from Decebal's Monologue*).
- it creates the ambiance (*Nocturna; The Shepherds' and Shepherdesses' Chorus*).
- it dynamizes the musical discourse or dramatizes the expression (the choral intervention at the beginning of the dialogue between Decebal and Traian).
- complementary dramatic element (*Lamento. Dona eis Requiem*).

### **Nocturna**

In this choral fragment, the composer actively expresses fundamental dimensions of nature's state, as well as, we could say, of a psychological state of mind (that of Dochia). Living in a dream is rendered as an artistic image of an existence at the brink between sleep and awakening – image that is achieved through a peaceful, mild and story-like incantation, in the absence of a tragic awareness. Everything is converted into beauty, into a fairy tale, into a delirious state.

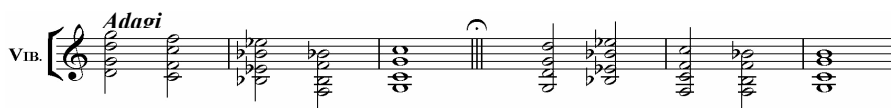
Of intense sensitivity, this *a cappella* chorus is written at a higher level, as, sometimes, the composer accepts the text as a pretext, and other times, as a suggestion for colour. In terms of melodic generosity and psychological torment, he inevitably directs the thoughts to a state of sonorous beatitude, which is more rarely found in contemporary works. The sound images confer a certain poetic load. We could even state that this chorus renders colours from the impressionist music era.

It is a remarkable chorus through its slow, organic evolution, through its sombreness, simplicity, through the permanent and refined cooperation between dynamics and timbre. It stands out through the lyricism and the sincerity in communicating an emotional content of meditation and reverie. In this chorus, a language with an ethnic colouring is used, in which the composer uses to full extent the timbre of each choral section, by alternating the female voice fragments with the male ones.

In regard to the dynamic level, we can notice the predominant use of low-intensity dynamic indications, according to the discreteness of the nocturnal atmosphere, with smooth alternations between *pp-p-mp*. These echo effects, the general *piano* indication, the long notes - all create the meditative, contemplative, calm character of this music.

This choral page starts off with a 6-measure introduction (*Adagio*) played by the *vibraphone*, an excellent sonorous effect that creates a calm and unbounded nocturnal atmosphere. Through slides of perfect fourths, Zgureanu creates a sense of tonal ambiguity.

**Ex. 1**



After this “landscape” depiction, the chorus starts off through gradual connections. Hence, by gradually overlapping one voice at a time [*Alto I, Alto II, Tenor* (at a major second interval), *Bass* (at an octave interval, from the tenor musical line)], the composer creates a diatonic chanting. Eventually, the tonality is defined (*C minor*), which serves as the basis for introducing the sopranos’ melodic motif, in the next measure.

The entire sonorous edifice is built by using the procedure of *mosaic-like juxtaposition* of the melodic motifs distributed to each voice. Thus, Zgureanu uses the timbre of each choral part to its full potential. Whilst the melodic motif is being rendered in one voice, the others play the role of the harmonic support (creating the atmosphere). An interesting effect is obtained thanks to the timbral algorithm. Each motif does not exceed the range of an octave and it progresses freely, being dominated by leaps of perfect, augmented and diminished fourths and fifths, sixths, sevenths and octaves, octave or by successive seconds. The alternation of musical modes is also present.

For example, look at the melodic motif in the bass line:

**Ex. 2**



Here, we can notice the alternation of the modes *C Phrygian (D flat)*, *C Aeolian (D natural)* and the *harmonic minor (B natural)*. The *augmented second* is intended to intensify the tension.

There are also present moments of harmonic exposition or of choral uniqueness (“*The late moon...*”). The composer gives it a very homogenous consistency, of a warm and sincere lyricism, with a meaningful *Aeolian* touch (*on F*).

## Ex. 3

*Adagio*

S  
Lu-na târ-zie dinmar-ginideta-ră în Li-ni-ștea sfân-tă eav reasă ră-sa - ră

A

T  
Lu-na târ-zie dinmar-ginideta-ră în Li-ni-ștea sfân-tă eav reasă ră-sa - ră

B

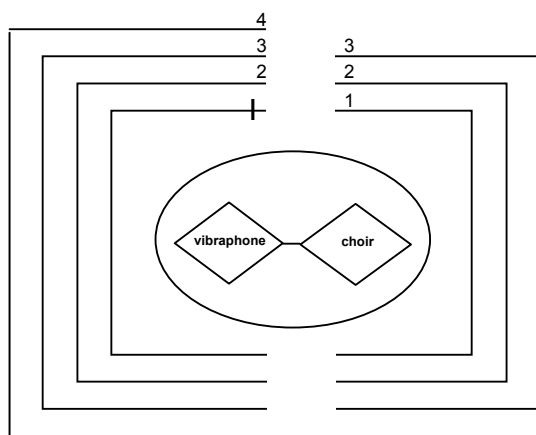
(Late moon upon the country's borders...)

Here, the music has a recitative-like nature, with the intention of increasing the dynamics and the agogics of the work. The tension is resolved by reintroducing the loose musical writing and the procedure of *mosaic-like juxtaposition* of the melodic motifs.

This choir piece is developed using a tripartite structure, in which each section is preceded by a vibraphone introduction.

The graphical representation resembles the following:

Fig. 1



**Legend:**  $I^1, I^2, I^3, I^4$  represent the number of interventions (on the left side – the vibraphone interventions, on the right side – the choir interventions, which employ the alternation principle: *vibrafone* → *choir*).  
 $I^4$  the fourth vibraphone intervention performs the function of *coda*.

The macroform is in agreement with the poetical form. Sections one and two are constructed on the same principle, which was previously mentioned. The third section is nothing but a resumption of the first five measures of section one, with augmentation.

### **Lamento. Dona eis Requiem**

Teodor Zgureanu emphasizes the moment of pain and sadness by using the *Requiem*, whose origin is the basis of the catholic liturgical text called *pro defunctis*. The author could have used the lamentation technique, whose origins, one might suspect, lies the Dacian mourning song called *torelle*, accompanied by a whistle<sup>4</sup>, but he chose the *Requiem* instead, as it proved useful in underlining our Latin ancestry, a new beginning, the first merging between the native language and the Latin.

The *Requiem* is not a message, but a confession of the human soul, suggesting the inexorable passing of time, the tragic feeling of time or that of eternal silence, of death or of crowded situations. It is conceived in an atmosphere of rituals, to correlate invocation with meditation. We are presented here with a profound meditation upon death. It is an oscillation between pain and resignation.

The *Requiem aeterna... (Adagio funesto. Lamento)* outlines the dramatic moment of musical development. It is an eight-measure period of a harmonic nature. The thematic unfolding begins on the seventh cord, which indicates the tonic septachord of the F major tonality, and then continues with the prefiguration of F minor in measure 3 and C major in measure 4.

This section continues its musical development on a latent F minor layer (in measure 5), then employs G major (in measure 7) and ends in A major. The vertically-obtained sonorous result constitutes the determining factor in the development of musical images, employing a symmetrically-constructed melodic line, a slow rhythm and a sombre and profoundly meditative and introspective atmosphere, which gives a religious touch to the composer's creation.

The second subsection – Tempo I („*Et lux perpetua...*“) consists of a nine-measure musical period, of a serene and lyrical character, in which the author employs a polyphonic procedure called *imitation*. It is a game of timbres developed by alternating the female parts with the male ones, thus capitalizing on often-divided timbres. Using this procedure, the choral fabric gains a wide sonority, with the ensemble sometimes achieving six mixed voices. This method is used in the first six measures of the musical period, with all the voices reaching common ground in the other three. In this way, the men's melody takes place on the women's *ostinato*, thus inserting a descending scale within the limits of an octave.

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<sup>4</sup> Russu, I. I., *The language of the Thraco-Dacian people*, second edition, Bucharest, 1967.

We would like to suggest that you follow the tonal plane of this subsection: *A major flat* (measures 1-2) → *C major* (measure 3) → *F minor* (measures 4-9).

The final subsection („*Ex audi...*“) represents an indivisible seven-measure musical period (*F minor*) of a homophonous-harmonic nature, which ends in *C major* (*C major* belonging to the *F harmonic minor – E natural* tonality).

The vertical resultant of the entire choir denotes the rich palette of harmonic colors that it possesses: chords with *ajoutées* elements, the presence of tonal ambiguity, frequencies based on octaves and unisons, the presence of the *second* (musical interval) in the vast majority of chords.

The tension of the entire chorus is ensured by the kinetic energy of voice overlapping and harmony.

### The ending – Hymn to the Dacian land

The ending starts off with an orchestral introduction (*Allegro tragico*) at 12/8. The melody exposed at unison by the group of wooden (*2Fl, Pic, 2Ob, C.ing., 2Cl*) and string (*2Vni, Vle*) instruments is seconded by a *tremollo-ostinato* at the *Cellos, Contrabass and Timpani sections* and a pedal at *BCI, 2Fg, CFg*, followed by a fugato (*From the tragic battle*) in *Andante tragico* interpreted by the choir backed by the group of string instruments and Campanes. At this time, the composer displays a remarkable contrapuntal writing in fugal style. At its base there lies a true *proposta* (*F minor*), of a real suggestive force. Its beginning, centered on a perfect-fourth leap, happily overlaps this melodic leap with the collocation: *din tragica*.

#### Ex. 4



The main theme appears in the choral voices, with the structure of the fugato encompassing four entries, carried out in the ascending order of fourths (*bass* on *C*, *tenor* on *F*; *alto* on *C*, *soprano* on *F*).

This simultaneous development on four methodical plans drives everything towards the moment of maximum intensity (*A ballade was born – The Romanian people*), sustained by the sonorities born from the vertical encounters of these concomitances. By observing the evolution of the harmonic parameter, one can outline the following path (*F minor*):  $t \rightarrow d6_4 \rightarrow t^n \rightarrow tsVI_2 \rightarrow s^n \rightarrow t \rightarrow t6_4$ .

Each choral part belonging to this fugato has a corresponding element in the strings orchestra, in accordance with their timbre. Thus, the *soprano voice part* is supported by *violins I and II*, the *alto voice part* by *violas*, the *tenor voice*



*part by cello and the bass voice part by contrabass*. It is a successful correlation of ingeniously-used timbres. The composer replays this episode, this time gradually including the main characters of the opera. Everything gains the following composition: reference point 2: Queen –Zamolxis – Vezina + Bass; reference point 3: Armin-Duras Diurpaneus + Tenor; reference point 4: Dochia + Alto; reference point 5: Ninvana + Soprano.

Following the reiteration of this fugato, the musical discourse continues with a nine-measure phrase to which we can assign two functions: that of the *coda* of the fugato and that of a connecting bridge between the two choirs [a fragment that takes place in harmonic F minor, with a final resolution in the T tonic (T) of the *C major* tonality].

This fugato brings to light a profound sensitivity, which cleared away in the end, making way to a resounding rush of life and – to the *Miorița* poem. What I find relevant is the use of “*Miorița*” at the end of the opera, which reflects the bright image of life, resembling “a river that flows in a perpetual lack of determination” – to quote the French philosopher Henri Bergson.

It is widely known that *Miorița* – a symbol of Romanian spirituality – has polarized the attention of many writers and composers, who tried to make sense of its profoundly philosophical meaning. While deciphering the term “folk ballade”, Vasile Alecsandri said that these “small poems about historical happenings and magnificent deeds” contain “priceless treasures of loving feelings, of great ideas, of historical notes, of superstitious beliefs, of ancestral traditions and, above all, of poetic expressions, which are original and unparalleled by foreign literature”.<sup>5</sup> Enchanted by *Miorița*’s beauty, Russo sincerely praised its anonymous creator by saying: „Next to these creators of ancient poetry (Virgil and Ovidius), a third poet was added, a shepherd of our fields and mountains, which created the most beautiful shepherd’s epic in the world: *Miorița*. Virgil and Ovidius themselves would have been justifiably proud, had they composed this poetic wonder”.<sup>6</sup> In this spiritual climate, we recall the words of maestro Marin Constantin: „ (...) is a masterpiece in the truest sense of the word, meaning that it touches the dimensions of perfection. (...) the tone and the core of *Miorița* represent an invitation to analytical meditation...they represent a major philosophical invitation. (...) *Miorița* is, undoubtedly, the peak of our popular genius and only in this spirit is it fit to approach it.”<sup>7</sup>

What made the composer focus on this jewel of folkloric creation? The determining factor may have been the profoundness of the popular philosophy expressed in *Miorița*’s lyrics. According to Lucian Blaga: “*Miorița*

<sup>5</sup> Vrabie, Gh., *Romanian popular ballad*, The „Academie” Printing House, Bucharest, 1966

<sup>6</sup> Fochi, A., *Miorița*, The “Academie” Printing House, 1964.

<sup>7</sup> Constantinescu, Gr., *The Madrigal - the Magic of sounds*. The “Didactică și Pedagogică” Printing house, Bucharest, 1996.

is the place in which the absolute is harmoniously intertwined with the relative, and the universal with the national".<sup>8</sup>

Miorița is indeed a symbol, a hallmark of courage and struggle, which comes from the millennial history of the Romanian people, of this peaceful and hard-working nation, of this people laden with too many of history's hardships.

Miorița's lyrics are emblematic, because they contain *in nuce* the essence of Romanian existence, the ideas of the whole opera: the hero's struggle to successfully carry out the assignment which was given onto him at birth.

According to Adrian Fochi's<sup>9</sup> typological classification, the composer used the first nucleus "*the initial epic framework*"; *the first theme – the place where the drama takes place*:

*Near a low foothill,  
At Heaven's doorsill...*

The final scene could have appeared on the funeral versant of a chorus, but the composer chose Miorița – a melody which imprints a luminous allure and sublime serenity and which embodies our people's philosophical conception and mankind's philosophical ideas about life, death, creation and self-sacrifice. We can clearly see the composer's intention to offer a special monumentality to this section. Its atmosphere adheres to that "spatial horizon to which our ancestral Romanian spirit is sympathetic, a horizon about which we keep somewhere, in a teary corner of our heart – even when we long ceased to live on this land – a vague paradisiac memory...".<sup>10</sup>

The author uses an authentic melody, which he incorporates into the canvas of the opera like a precious mosaic. In this musical fragment, Zgureanu creates a mixture of *folklore* and *classical music* (folklore treated from in a polyphonic manner – the presence of imitative polyphony), in which the melody has kept its original folkloric profile and has not lost its national colours through the metamorphosis of its elements in the spirit of the classical rhythmical-harmonic syntax. The author overlaps two melodies: the authentic one (stated in the Soprano and Tenor parts) and the one created by the composer (stated in the Alto and Bass parts), in accordance with the morphological elements of the former. Thus, in this alternation, one can clearly see the opera's polyphonic elements (the imitative writing). By organically mixing the quotation itself with the elaborated sonorous material, the author produces a Romanian sonorous space, a complex melody. A game of timbres is present, obtained by alternating high voices with low ones.

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<sup>8</sup> Blaga, L., *The educated Miorița of the Romanian spirituality*. The "Viitorul Românesc" Printing House, Bucharest, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> Fochi, A., *Miorița*, The Publishing House of the Romanian Academy, 1964.

<sup>10</sup> Blaga, L., *The educated Miorița of the Romanian spirituality*, The "Viitorul Românesc" Publishing house, Bucharest, 1995.

## Ex. 5

*Lento, legiero e molto*

S  
Pe-un pi-cior de plai..... pe-o gu-ră de

A  
Pe-un pi-cior de plai Pi-cior de plai pe-o gu-ră de rai

T  
Pe-un pi-cior de plai..... pe-o gu-ră de

B  
Pe-un pi-cior de plai Pi-cior de plai pe-o gu-ră de rai

(Near a low foothill...)

In the musical constructions of this melodic path, we want to point out the presence of polymodality, which has the following unfolding: *C Ionian* (measures 1-2), *C Aeolian* (measure 3), *C Mixolydian* (measure 7), *C Aeolian* (measure 9), *F Mixolydian* (measure 11), *F Aeolian* (measure 19), and, at reiteration, it ends in *C Ionian*.

The entire sonorous architecture clothes the literary text in adequate structures and emphasizes its content of ideas. The harmony that sustains the sonorous edifice is of a tonal-diatonic nature. It is based on the evolution of the following tonal plan: *C major* → *F major* → *B flat major* → *C minor* → *C major* → *B flat major* → *C minor* → *F major* (the coda – *C major*).

This musical fragment is supported by an orchestral *tutti*, in which each instrument maintains a rhythmic *ostinato* throughout the entire melodic development, with changes taking place in harmony. Thus, *Vni I, II* and *Vle* maintain a continuous movement, with an active rhythm of sixteenth notes, which institutes the pulsation of the fragment, *trumpets I, II* – of eighth notes, *Vlc, Cb, Timpani* – a movement of quarter notes, *2Fl, Pic, 2Ob., C.ingl.* – doubling the choir, and the other instruments hold the harmonic pillars – this is why hearing this theme produces the impression of a block, monolithic structure. This fragment is followed by an *Andante Cantabile* (centered on natural *F minor* and on *F harmonic minor* – measures 9-10, reference point 10), which continues to maintain the idea of growth and of straining in the sonorous discourse, in which the unison plays a special part. In fact, the composer used the procedure of transitioning from unison to harmonic exposition and then back to unison. It is a

fragment for a male choir, supported by orchestra, which takes place on a homophonous-harmonic writing, of an aerated nature, after which the composer retakes the first phrase of the fragment “*Near a low foothill*” ending in unison (on the C tone, in *molto crescendo* style, taking it until *fff*). At this moment, the composer offers us a model of ending the opera, through which he once again proves the unison’s capacity to sustain a moment of maximum tension.

Teodor Zgureanu fully penetrated the interior universe of Miorița, thus entering its delicate and emotional inner space.

**The ending – *Hymn to the Dacian land*** denotes a note of professional honesty, as it is characterized by the following features:

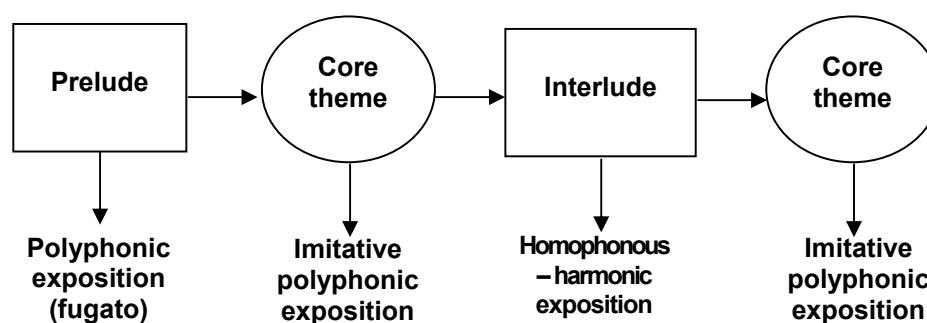
The presence of alternations of:

- tempo;
- character;
- rhythms;
- meter;
- timbres

The presence of polymodality, all of which contributing to the variety of the musical discourse.

The macroform of this opera ending is depicted in the following image:

Fig. 2



### Conclusions

Teodor Zgureanu acts as a musician that has found his own style, his own way of expression, thus bringing an original voice to the Bessarabian music. The author expresses interesting spiritual depths and inner tensions built upon the sonorous framework of the Romanian specificity. Resorting to the folkloric substance is one of the constant features in Zgureanu’s work. He mainly uses rhythmic and melodic elements that are specific to the folk melody, which he decants by subjecting them to his own, unmistakable language.

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