

TEACHING STUDENTS TO PLAY THE PIANO ON OLD AND INSUFFICIENT INSTRUMENTS IS THE SAME AS “TEACHING THEM TO SWIM WITHOUT WATER”

Interview by MIRELA MERCEAN-ȚÂRC¹

SUMMARY. An interview with professor Ninuca Oșanu Pop, PhD, honorary citizen of Cluj-Napoca, president of the Sigismund Toduță Foundation and founding member of the Romanian Mozart Society, of the “European Piano Teachers” and of the “International Piano Duo Association”. In the 53 years of activity in concerts, she had 53 world premieres and 106 premieres. She taught generations of pianists, some of them with brilliant careers abroad now. She is a permanent member of the Ars Nova contemporary music ensemble and together they promoted both the Romanian and the European modern contemporary music. She made numerous recordings at Radio Bucharest, Cluj, Budapest, Brussels, Paris, London as well as Electrecord, Hungaroton vinyl discs / CDs and she took part in television programs. She is the author of several scientific studies and of the book *Elemente stilistice ale scriiturii pianistice enesciene (Elements of style in Enescu’s compositions for piano)*. She annually organized the interpretation and creation contests Gh. Dima, S. Toduță, she was and is member of national and international juries of piano competitions.

Keywords: Ninuca Oșanu Pop, piano teacher, Romanian piano school, performer, musicologist.

- *Prof. Ninuca Oșanu Pop, your professional activity has successfully combined several directions for a long time now: that of a piano teacher, performer, and musicologist. Which one of these directions fulfils you the most, which one defines your personality?*

- I think that he who feels attracted to the musical universe early on in life tries in different ways to enter this territory of rational-emotional communication. First, there is the overwhelming impression made by musical masterpieces in high quality performances, then, gradually, the wish to be yourself the creator of this magic appears. During



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the long process of learning, at a certain level you notice that the hours dedicated to the study of the technique are not sufficient, that more adjacent information is needed, that you have to know the process of creation itself in order to recreate, to have thorough arguments in order to support the interpretative options.

Looking back, I can say that my main preoccupation has been that of guiding future pianists and musicians. In order to fulfill this mission I had to assimilate a diverse repertoire and to have that experience which can only be gained in front of an audience, living with emotion the responsibility of artistic recreation. Thus, along more than four decades, the teaching work has become a *modus vivendi*, which, at first, was completed by the joy of the public performances; then I started to enjoy more and more the fulfilment offered by the interdisciplinary research of the thematic. Actually, all the interpretative and musicological efforts along the years have also had a certain purpose in the desire to be able to offer clarifications to those who open the scores with the wish to study them thoroughly, to discover among the lines of the musical text revelations worthy to be shared with their fellow men.

- *Along the years, you have had talented, diligent or exceptional students. Which are your former students whose personality, talent and intelligence has propelled them into the Romanian and international piano playing world? What is the fate of these students? Does the Romanian society motivate them to stay in the country and be recognized as values, or is the "mirage" of the Western world, of a decent living or of chances of professional recognition stronger and they prefer it? We can speak of a migration of the Romanian intelligent people. Is there such a migration of the Romanian interpretative values?*

- Considering the large number of those awaiting recognition and the elevation of the interpretative standards, the recognition of a *solo pianist* becomes a dream reserved for the exceptions. In this respect, among my former students an honorary place belongs to Daniel Goîți, PhD, whose artistic rising is the measure of his capacity of giving and of his burning passion for the piano and for music? The suppression for financial reasons of the positions of soloists in the musical institutions, which should be destined to such exceptions, has determined him to embrace a teaching career, an area where he also enjoys recognition.

In order to answer the rest of the question, a sociological research would be necessary based on a large database. If we consider our area, the long succession of my students' names, we notice that more than half of them are now in the United States of America. At first, they were leaving for family reasons, but it was actually an expression of the wish for a better life. Lately, the mirage of crossing the Atlantic is more and more attractive in order to find better conditions for professional recognition.

We know that they were well integrated in the artistic life, having obtained their Masters' degree and even the highest academic degree – the Doctorate. We will only mention Tudor Bota, Sergiu Gherman, Ely L. Kálmán (SUA), Crenguța Goilă (Mexic).

For those who graduate and remain in the country, the most likely is the teaching career, materialized in teaching various music courses. Consequently, the other half of my former students bring their contribution to the musical education of our society, being, in equal proportions, high school teachers and members of the academic staff of universities.

As the chamber music is an important area, testing not only the piano qualifications, but also the general musical ones, together with sensitivity and refinement, we are happy about the recognition gained by Professor Assistant. Cipriana Gavrișiu, PhD, a master accompanying teacher in a duo of violin and piano, or that of Professor Assistant Vera Negreanu, PhD, in a piano duo, which completes a fruitful teaching activity. In the same context, the piano duo made up of the two doctoral students Diana Barb and Silvia Sbârciu has brought more colour and youthful energy to the cultural scenery of Cluj-Napoca.

In the present context, the teacher has to prepare the students for integration within various cultural contexts, having as a perspective that the painful term of *migration* could be replaced by the expression *circulation of values*, which in my opinion, will be characteristic for the future.

- Which of the qualities and aptitudes are most important for a pianist in his/her evolution towards achievement: intelligence, sensitivity, musical aptitudes, even dexterity? Is there a genetic factor which influences the exceptional evolution of a young pianist, or is it possible for any young person to be educated in order to achieve? Is it true that the result is made up of 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration, fact also mentioned by the great Enescu, himself an exceptional pianist?

- This question could be, in itself, the subject of a debate. Trying to give a short answer, we will first mention the importance of having an ear for music with all its components, the form of the hands, as well as the child's development in a favourable environment. The early selection of those who will have a more rapid evolution from the point of view of musicality and intelligence, the manifest interest for the art of sounds can form the basis of motivation which will later become the student's will to overcome the numerous difficulties appearing along the path.

If we take into consideration the multiple families, which gave birth, to geniuses of the universal music, we can't dispute the importance of the genetic factor, but it doesn't mean that there can't be talented children coming from families with a latent interest in music. Aptitudes are just the first condition that opens the way towards continuous improvement, which is the result of tenacious

work under competent guidance. The interweaving of the various aspects is so tight and diverse that we try to avoid percentages. The proportion mentioned in Enescu's famous quotation comes because of a wish not to overestimate the importance of talent and has as a purpose to encourage the young musicians to work. *Inspiration* only appears after long hours of studying as a striking revelation projecting a new light on the values contained by the musical work.

Regarding the term of recognition, a few explanations are necessary. If some time ago they referred to *exceptional achievements*, presently, because of the enlarged phrase *performing art*, the notion tends to comprise a multitude of artistic phenomena presented *live* in more or less conventional spaces. We notice "liberation" of the spaces usually used for artistic performances, as they are now open to any kind of public manifestations. In a wide view, anyone can be educated to step on the stage, but the "easy" performance can only attract simple-minded audiences who wish to be themselves the ones receiving applause.

In contrast, the results of the sacrifices made by the real *champions* are savoured mostly by the juries establishing hierarchies in contests, assisted by a small number of music lovers. From among the vast repertoires performed at the highest standards, only the *final concert* of the best one will enjoy broadcasting and a few appointments. It is only then that he/she will enter a new and fierce competition against the winners of other national contests and/or with other artists promoted on other criteria.

- *How dependent is the work of a teacher on a student's attributes and qualities? Is there a level of interpretative mastery, which would allow the student to discard the teacher's guidance? When does this phenomenon happen, can we estimate the age or the professional, physical, mental or emotional maturity of the student? What are the feelings of the teacher who helps at the fulfilment of such a destiny?*

- The qualities of the student are the gold deposits waiting to be discovered, refined, and polished in order to reach the shape to be admired. The responsibility of the teacher increases when he/she guides a special talent, as, in case educational dysfunctions appear, the aptitudes won't develop at full capacity.

The assimilation of the interpretative mastery happens by gradually acknowledging the various components of the phenomenon. The continuous stimulation of self-control contributes to the reaching of maturity in musical thinking, which has an individual character and is unpredictable. By offering the student models of learning, the teacher actually prepares his/her own retreat from this complex process. However, even when the student is able to fairly assimilate a score, the teacher still has to play the part of the virtual audience. He/she is the one who tests the coherence, the degree of mastering the

emotions, as well as the degree in which the sounds produced perform the communicative function. After having tried to contribute to the configuration of destinies, comprising a large area of manifestation and serving music, inspired by the wisdom of maternal love, the teacher retreats, following from afar their evolution with the sentiment of having fulfilled his/her duty.

- *The pianist Dan Grigore once said in a television show of the late Iosif Sava that "a musician's talent belongs to humanity and not necessarily to a school or a people, as when his education is completed he becomes a universal artist, a «community asset», capable of expressing generally human aesthetic truths". We know, however, that there are international schools for piano interpretation. Are there any characteristics, which depend upon the temperament, the intelligence, the sensitivity of a people? For example, it is well known that the Jewish are extremely endowed musically, that the Russians and the Slavic peoples are, in general, inclined towards nostalgia, melancholy, that the French have a certain refinement, or that the Italians and the Spanish are temperamental. Are all of these just preconceived ideas?*

- In the area of the "classical" music, the musical talent can only develop in the context of a universal cultural horizon, in a continuous flow of information, which highlights the truth of the above. Art itself expresses generally human aesthetic truths. However, as a *community asset*, the artist was also meant to represent it in an international context, along with the spiritual and temperamental characteristics you mentioned.

From the point of view of the instrumental mastery, the pianist carries the mark of the creators of school recognized among the professionals as *ancestors* who started the genealogies to be admired in the end of certain writings. For them, the national borders have never borne limitations in the past and it is the same in the present day. As an important tendency, we can say that the dissemination of the pianist art started during the 18th and 19th centuries because of the transfer of the piano teachers from Western Europe to Eastern Europe, while in the following century the students made the reversed trip.

If we look at the present situation, the criteria, which guide the compass, are connected with well known personalities and with securing the conditions for decent living and study. As teaching students to play the piano on old and insufficient instruments is the same as „teaching them to swim without water”, because of the number and quality of the instruments, the North American institutions are very attractive.

- *The Romanian cultured musical creation, which appeared only in the 19th century, had to compensate for a gap compared to the western musical culture. It was only in the beginning of the 20th century that, by the compositions of Enescu's generation, this gap was compensated. We know that your*

musicological research was mainly focused on highlighting the role of certain forerunners of the piano interpretation: G. Enescu, Dinu Lipatti, Ana Voileanu-Nicoară, Ecaterina Fotino-Negru. Can we speak of a Romanian piano school? Where does it come from, from the pedagogic and the artistic points of view, from the French, the German or the Russian school?

- Indeed, if we look back, we can speak of a great effort inspired by Enescu's example, who mobilized prominent personalities to bring the Romanian music into the 20th century. Their biographies repeat the pattern: studies started in the country and continued abroad. If until the First World War the options were Vienna, Leipzig, Berlin, during the interwar period it was Paris, the two institutions, the National Conservatory and the famous École Normale have also greatly contributed to the development of numerous pianists and piano teachers.

During the following period, the *soviet school* was favoured, even if it was, at its origins, German. These mutations, which had no connections with art whatsoever, have generated differences of opinion and conflicting situations only to be overcome by the acceptance of the diversity of the artistic expression. From the synthesis, which followed inherently, an interest for the styles emerged, as references can be made towards the way of interpretation of the different authentic sources.

Because of the number and the quality of the pianists who have animated the Romanian concert life and who have proudly represented our country abroad, we can speak of a Romanian piano school – with a branch in Cluj-Napoca – integrating in the standards of the universal musical art.

- *Can we really speak of a piano school in Cluj-Napoca?*

- The recognition of a *school* from the point of view of attributing certain defining characteristics can only be made from the outside and only based on a long historical period. As far as the age goes, we still have 14 years until reaching the centenary of the institutionalized musical education in Cluj.

We have to admit though that, by the preservation of tradition with contributors such as Ana Voileanu-Nicoară, Ecaterina Fotino-Negru, Eliza Ciolan and Gheorghe Halmos and their followers, we have reached a level where the *Graduation diploma* is accepted and it facilitates cultural exchanges with the musical institutions around the world. The solid qualifications of our students allow them to benefit from the bonus offered by the international education projects. The regret of not having them around is comforted by the thought that extremely valuable students were admitted at prestigious universities such as Bogdan Vaida at Musikhochschule Freiburg, Georgiana Fodor at École Normale – Paris, Tamara Stăncel at California State University Fullerton. This is, in our opinion, the best confirmation of a school.

- As a member of the famous ensemble *Ars Nova*, but also as a performer in numerous recitals, in various public conferences, musicological symposiums and radio programs you support and contribute to the recognition of the Romanian and international contemporary musical creation. Why this personal choice? Some pianists avoid this repertoire. Why do you think these compositions are important in the becoming of a young performer? There are young people who prefer, or consider that "it suits them", a certain type of repertoire situated in different stylistic areas, the Romantic one or the musical Impressionism, the Baroque or even the modern music. Would you plead for a pluralistic musical education or would you encourage the choice of a preferred repertoire?

- Supporting the national musical creation has been a major ambition even from the first years of the Cluj-Napoca Conservatory. Along the years, it became normality to study the Romanian repertoire and to impose and respect high standards regarding the quality of the text, the recreation of the atmosphere and the ideas.

Therefore, as I have early discovered the folkloric note in the works of Marțian Negrea, Sabin Drăgoi, Max Eisikovits, I have had the opportunity to notice that these works can also captivate the attention of the audience. Later on I would have the revelation of the first two works for piano bearing the signature of the maestro S. Toduță: *Passacaglia* and *Sonatina for piano*, which became "classical works". They have opened the path towards other discoveries, towards the privilege to perform his new creations even from manuscripts, towards having the personal guidance of the great composer for first performances.

As I was part of a generation, which, because of the political orientation, had no access to the Western contemporary music, after graduation we felt the need to fill this void. We each began to become acquainted with scores obtained with great difficulty (sometimes copied by hand or photographed!) from the works of A. Schönberg, A. Berg, A. Webern, O. Messiaen and others. We were also attracted to the stylistic innovations in the works of the young composers. I was very lucky to find myself at the beginning of my career just when the great composers like: Cornel Țăranu, Vasile Herman, Ede Terényi, Dan Voiculescu and others were at the peak of affirmation.

Therefore, my participation in 1968 in this project for disseminating the contemporary music called "Ars Nova" initiated and leads by its mentor, the composer C. Țăranu, perfectly coincided with my desire to belong to the artistic contemporary world.

The success obtained in the international tours of the ensemble was accompanied by the satisfaction of obtaining new scores to be proposed for future concerts. We think that the first public performances of the *8 Preludes* and of the work *Oiseaux exotiques* by O. Messiaen, of the second *Sonata* by

André Jolivet and others will probably be mentioned in a future history of the repertoire preoccupations as arguments for our uninterrupted belonging to the European culture.

As I am well aware that the education we now offer will serve as a starting point in our students' careers in the future decades, I think that a large, pluralistic area should be embraced, from which, according to the environment and individual preferences, more specialized and restricted areas can appear.

- *Nowadays more and more young people choose more "secular" professions in order to have security and a higher living standard. Few of them chose a different path which can offer them a spiritual and artistic development more than material, a path which, as Liszt once said, would make them unique: "sometimes the artist extends in his imagination the effect he has over a few individuals, on a mass of people; he feels the king of all intelligent beings, he feels he has inside an infinitely small piece of the creative force; as by producing sounds he creates emotions, feelings, thoughts. It is a dream which glorifies his existence". (Liszt: Romantic pages). What do you advise these bold young people?*

- The great artistic personalities have always appeared in the context of the access to a vast cultural horizon. The new Millennium is no exception, the pleading for a pluralistic approach being completed by the one for scientific and artistic access to information. Those who feel that they have that *creative force* will find the energy to contribute to the spiritual evolution of humanity. Those who feel this calling are not allowed to "bury their talent."

Listening to the calling gives meaning to the longest efforts, considered normal from the inside, but seen as sacrifices from the outside. Considering the rapid transformations of the musical affirmation paths, good access to information is necessary in the cultural and artistic present day in general, as well as a visionary approach.

(Translated from Romanian by Roxana Huza)