

## BOOK REVIEW

### EXCELSIOR: OUR MUSIC, MY LIFE

**(confessions of the conductor, professor, and composer Valentin Gruescu, in conversation with musicologist Petruța-Maria Coroiu)**

“I learned from them (from my parents) that  
*Music must be loved in order to be able to create it.*  
And studied, and *understood, in order to be able to love it.*”

(Valentin Gruescu)

Once upon a time... Indeed, like never before. Like more than twenty years ago, when I was about to leave the Music University in whose exceptional educational space I had spent the most beautiful years of my professional life, having the privilege to know legendary professors... Legendary people, who sign not only pages in the book of your life, but chapters... Legendary professors who write not only on notebooks, but also on our hearts.

A maestro: Valentin Gruescu, deep and warm, sincere and emblematic, grand and natural. The Master whose musical Liturgies we hoped would never end, officiating in spaces which for many others were just concert or lecture halls, the musician who lives his art as an offering to God (The Giver of all gifts and – according to his own testimony – “...the best director of our lives”), the man able to joke about suffering and operations, but not about his Concerts, not about the responsibility that the conductor’s fate carries before the entire Universe. The ever-present memory of his interpretative gestures that always dematerialized towards the sky, where Music brought – in this unique way – a sacrifice on the Altar of the high serene. Maestro Valentin Gruescu.





**Maestro Valentin Gruescu: photo from concerto**

In the book that I managed to motivate him to write, the book of his life, Master Valentin Gruescu confesses precious words that had to remain settled in writing: life experiences, interpretation experiences, pedagogy. Much about **OUR MUSIC**, less about **HIS LIFE** (he insisted on confirming this order in the title, giving absolute priority to Music, in the service of which he profoundly placed his LIFE): "I accepted to write (guided by formidable interrogative milestones) not a page, which was not very easy, but a Book, all about Our Music and Life. In general, Life, and, in particular, mine. Our music, my life. Elevated to ***Him, the best Director of our lives.*** Excelsior. And thus, the title remained" (p. 8).

The maestro presents himself succinctly, highlighting all the qualities he has honored: “I have taught subjects related to the vocal-symphonic conducting repertoire, to the rhetoric of gesture-language attitudes in Vocal-Symphonic Conducting during the master’s years at the Bucharest Conservatory, starting from 1986. But my vocational calling has combined musical composition in the classical-romantic to modern style with conducting both Academic Choirs and Orchestras, alongside Musicology and the honor of being professor at the University, including a Doctorate in Music at the country’s first higher music school, the National University of Music in Bucharest” (p. 24).

The maestro recalls **his first unexpected encounter with music**, precisely at a... football match, around the age of 5: “that unforgettable torrent of sound, with everything that could make the air, the atmosphere, everything vibrate. I was in a volcano. I woke up with tears. It was a sacred moment because it was the Anthem of Romania and a sea of men singing it with all their strength, as best they could. Such a thing cannot be forgotten... It was not just heard, it was felt with every pore, with all the air and light. I don’t even remember how the match ended. But I can never forget the vibrating volcano from hundreds of thousands of chests... I was just a child...” (p. 10).

The Romanian Athenaeum, then music school no. 3 *Știrbei Vodă* from Bucharest were the inevitable stops of his musical education, first as a violinist, then in the company of choir conductor Nicolae Ghiță during high school: “I could never have imagined that I would take over, organize, and lead the choir made famous by my former teacher from the 9th grade of high school (1968)...” (pag. 38).

A special tribute is paid to **the parents** who supported his vocation: “I believe my first teachers were (ad-hoc) my own parents” (p. 11). The lavish discourse (richly metaphorical on multiple communication levels) also brings to the foreground the figures of the masters with whom he perfected himself after 1984: “apart from this constellation – which I now say is extremely rare – that I unexpectedly encountered in my student life, rare and precious opportunities smiled at me throughout the time between 1984-2024, together with knowing them, but also losing some, admiring them and working with some of the most gifted thinkers and creators alive. Valuable people who have reached advanced ages, lucid if they have managed to stay that way (and how good it is that many have succeeded!), can offer a unique gift (in principle and in fact) for the life of the young professional! Here could be your chance, you might find out (...) something revealing has truly existed since your grandparents’ time. These demigods in life can’t wait to unload their overflow, and if you approach them with sincere interest and they consent – sensing your honesty – incredible miracles might unfold for you (...). If you had not been at this osmotic impact of ideas, these secrets of life would

have been lost forever. (...) You pay a few hours, but they pay their entire lives, you will often see them sighing, talking to you, looking at you as if from chiaroscuro; you embody their very youth, playing with time!" (p. 11-12).

The possessor of a lively, fervent, warm, and sometimes acidic verb, honest and clear-minded, at peace with himself, Maestro Valentin Gruescu had the same remarkable qualities in his sung or spoken discourse during conducting classes – unforgettable for dozens of generations of students. He currently confesses: "In fact, I feel like I'm on a solo strike. I no longer have students, classes, rehearsals, courses, exams, tons of scores analyzed from one day to the next, videos with conductors, concerts, attendance sheets, rankings, requests... I miss my students crazily, I miss the vibrant life where I felt my purpose with responsibility. It's harder for me to just sit. (...) That purpose and involvement had created in 35 years a self-motion that gave me meaning and I didn't even feel tired. Now I feel it even though I'm no longer making that effort" (email, personal correspondence). "I don't want this to seem like an autobiographical novel, but rather a sincere expression of a profession of faith, since I've been given such a privilege to spend time together about Music and Life" (p. 9).

The integrity of his life, creative (conducting, composing) and pedagogical concepts often cost him marginalization and refusals: "as a result of the professional and life experiences I was accumulating immediately after graduating from university, I learned things I dreamed of being able to share with anyone in need. I didn't even know how concretely this dream would materialize! The problem is that until I had accumulated experience (a matter of time), I sometimes faced quite severe obstacles, seemingly for decades, from countless walls, rigidities, refusals, hesitations, even though nothing seemed impossible to me from what I proposed and in whose advancement I committed to work consistently selflessly, but at rhythms and with convictions that even surprised the then unyielding guardians of *it can't be done*" (pag. 16).

"Being HOW YOU SHOULD for what *you want* to achieve already means a valuable step in being able to do what *you want to do*. Not doing WHAT YOU WANT TO DO, but WANTING AND DOING WHAT YOU KNOW YOU SHOULD DO. Understanding this well, the next step is to actually act. It is good to respond with assumed actions to the simple questions of life: what do you do, why do you do it, how do you do it, when, and how do you respond to what is necessary, and in what way do you need to be and act in order to respond and be satisfied with your daily purpose and in your life. (...) To study thoroughly; to value stable and proven values; to understand people but also to shape them. To be thirsty for knowledge, for ability, for success, for daring, to associate for something good and beautiful with good and

beautiful people. To learn to say NO firmly when necessary, but also to beneficially put something in its place (necessarily!!). To educate yourself honestly and to multiply and perpetuate this with and from conviction (...). To bring joy to everyone because you are an artist and they love Art. It makes you happy that they all love you, including because you also love Art and Them. (...) To be forgiving but not unstable, to be authoritative but not tyrannical, to be uncompromising but not inhumane. To be able to provide power as an example. To succeed in learning steadily, to learn to succeed steadily. And after many more of these, to be a Musician and a Man at the same time and in the same life" (p. 20).

The conductor is responsively involved relationally in all contexts in which a performer can operate, and the need for balance in this regard becomes crucial: "out of delicacy and some diplomacy, both necessary, knowing that there are also egos, it is good to adopt restrained, measured, non-invasive, and as elegant behaviors as possible" (p. 33).

Being stylistically closer to "the temperamental plus attitudinal epic effluvium and the relaxed expression of dramatic sensitivity of post-romanticism, at an osmotic boundary – towards the transcendental – with the elegance of Impressionist coloring" (p. 33), maestro Valentin Gruescu has interpretatively honored an immense repertoire, which encompasses a vast cultural territory: from folk miniatures in choral arrangement to Romanian cultured music for vocal ensembles, from Renaissance music to masterpieces of late Romanticism, from pedagogical works to those of large vocal-symphonic scope.

Conducting represents the interpretative art par excellence, of the highest complexity, which brings together all the other aspects that it entails: "life is as we know it and much more complex if we care. As such, processes have followed processes; like in a refinery buzzing under cavalcades full of ideas and actions; analyzing, decanting, processing, judging, synthesizing, affirming and denying, melting, sublimation, conclusions, decisions, then attitudes, scheduling and actions. The results ultimately translate their essences sublimated into concepts, principles, concrete facts, and objective applications, all and each part, holographic yield of essential substance where the cerebral, the ethical and the affective synergistically collaborate" (p. 13). This alloy has generated the process based on the charge with which I invested characters when I taught not only conducting but also the ART OF BEING HUMAN, that conducts not people, but MUSIC perfected together with people who can be seen and heard physically!! In this way, as a Conductor, you are not only listened to or feared, but loved, listened to, understood, valued, and followed without hesitation. You become a role model for musical life" (p. 23).

Conducting is seen through the lens of an elite synthesizing and organizing attitude: "what does conducting responsibility entail beyond the general interpretative framework? Taking on organizational duties; conceiving relevant yet original interpretative strategies that you represent and that represent you; combining pragmatism (extramusical) of a social-human nature with inspirations and aspirations of a sensitive, philosophical, metaphysical nature; lucidity in one's own working regime, which must include strict professional fundamentals; educating the mentality, attitude and personality of the conductor, on the basis of which there are non-negotiable responsibilities; to love and appreciate your colleagues in the choir/orchestra, they are people, not keys; the building, educating, maintaining and adjusting all the internal and external norms and reactions of the conductor in contact with the ensemble of musicians, in contact with the audience, in contact with the work of art; to be at the same time a musician, psychologist, organizer, parent, colleague, friend, person of spirit; to concentrate and to release energetic effluvia through the augmentative means of the masses of performers in the form of artistic interpretation of the work of art; to win on merit and to maintain the trust of all in the specific conducting capabilities of the leader, that is, in the leadership abilities of the conductor; to study, to maintain and to perfect the technical, sensitive, athletic and logistical form of the conductor's preparation; to always be convinced and to always be convincing; to guarantee the choice of the ideal solution in the shortest humanly possible time through the conditioned reflex to study; to practice both wisdom and spontaneity anytime, anywhere, in anything; to love Art, Humanity, Communication; **to be yourself**" (p. 14-15)

The conducting evolution occurs not only in front of an ensemble but also in front of one's own inner instance: "the conductor builds himself appropriately with everything he means, with everything he knows, with everything he can and has to do, and with everything he represents in the interpretation algorithm" (p. 16). "Technique is an essential tool for fortifying confidence and for the sensitive nonchalance of the interpretative evolution" (p. 24).

**Students, disciples** (the pedagogical dimension of the maestro's life) represent a driving force for his musical activity, dedicated to the training of generations of performers who today work on multiple continents of the world: "the young generation of students is not a special category compared to the usual audience; young people are a special category compared to us, those who are no longer the young generation (except perhaps in spirit), they are our spiritual children, who can carry the torch of our teachings in a way that is particularly suitable for them (...); this is our great Exam concerning our conscience and our work with them" (p. 16).

Maestro Valentin Gruescu made from his conducting desk not only a platform for musical science but also for Life: “the university teaches you during your studies to become a musician, the Professor teaches you to become a Personality. The development of my Students as Musicians and future prominent Personalities has become my duty” (p. 18). In front of the students, he became a living model of professionalism and dedication, preaching from the height of the *catedra* a vision not only musical but also a vision of life: “over time, you learn both what to do and what is not worth doing anymore, redirecting time and energies more effectively. Enter into life lessons. I have completely and decisively transferred all attention exclusively to my purpose in direct relation to my students and their abilities and aspirations. Such a thing truly deserves effort and passion; it is never *too much*” (p. 35). “To honor your calling with conviction: (...) if you do your duty well, enjoy the results and warmly teach others too, this is enough” (p. 24).

Music provides the maestro with unique confessions of loyalty, confessions of faith that we witnessed – as students – in the musical act of interpretation: “I learned from them (from my parents) that *Music must be loved in order to be able to create it. And studied, and understood, in order to be able to love it*” (p. 11). “**Stay true.** Keep maturing and learn to navigate the ocean of life! Be careful of currents and winds. **Do your job impeccably.** It will be your defense. **Protect your work and its values.** Multiply the results in multiple directions, so they won’t be stolen or minimized. It would be a shame to have worked in vain. And that’s how I tried. After a while, I taught this to my young musicians in class, alongside music, conducting, techniques, the psychology of performance, the miraculous object of our work. I realized that I have advocated for others in life better than for myself personally. I am happy because the goal has reached its target. They have grown and now they are strong. The dear children and young people are above all” (p. 36).

The truth is that the challenge of facing your own life, with the way you have preserved and honored its values, is as difficult as facing the judgment that people, and ultimately, God will pronounce at the end: it means confronting yourself – in fact, the hardest confrontation of all possible. Trying to step out of the predictability of some usual questions, managing to provoke answers about the most special aspects of an artist’s life (...), I preferred to be the element that opens the memory box of a maestro whose words needed to be written for the generations to come. This is how the book of life of the conductor, composer and teacher Valentin Gruescu was born: OUR MUSIC, MY LIFE.

PETRUȚA MARIA COROIU<sup>1</sup> 

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor PhD Habil., Faculty of Music, Transilvania University of Braşov, Romania.  
E-mail: [petruta.manutcoroiu@unitbv.ro](mailto:petruta.manutcoroiu@unitbv.ro)

