

## THE ORCHESTRAL PLANE IN THE OPERA ALEXANDRU LĂPUȘNEANU BY GHEORGHE MUSTEA

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**SUMMARY.** Essentially this study aims at emphasizing the orchestral plane in the Opera "Alexandru Lăpușneanu" by Gheorghe Mustea. The structure of the musical material is based on the thematic contrast, having a strong folk nature. The melodic of the opera proves to be greatly inventive, as it seeks effects of tone colors that are found in its ornamental mantle. In the orchestral score, the composer uses free improvisations and heterophonic elements and he actively polyphonicizes the sonorous texture.

**Keywords:** Bessarabian opera, Gheorghe Mustea, Alexandru Lăpușneanu, orchestral plane, musical material.

The instrumental ensemble used by the composer is a large orchestra. From scene to scene, the instruments vary, which allows for diversity in the sound (with the evident intention of strongly highlighting the direction of the vocal lines).

The orchestral plane of the opera is conceived organically, it is dramatic and contrasting.

The orchestral numbers fulfill clearly defined functions, actively influencing the content of the opera. Hence, the orchestra has the role of an active character:

- it sets the fluency and the link between vocal sections;
- after the choral culminating points, it is the orchestra that emphasizes the moment (the action);
- it creates the dramatic ambiance;
- it unifies and ensures the integrity of the opera.

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Each act or image starts off and ends with a symphonic introduction; hence, the orchestra makes the shift towards a new stage of the dramatic development.

With each scene, the instrumental peaks vary, allowing for diversity in sound and for a different highlighting of the vocal lines.

The composer creates superb orchestrations in various combinations, which enhances the sonorous expressiveness of this work.

If we look at the overall evolution of the instrumental sections, we can mainly find a tendency to individualize the tone colors, to exploit their most specific traits or even to rediscover new possibilities, by including, among the instruments in the orchestra, a few rare instruments, seldom found in such scores: *the kaval (shepherd's pipe), the iron chain, the marimba and the wooden box.*

The composer also uses various string procedures (*tremolos, glissandos, flageolets, solos* in the *violin* and *contrabass*, particularly in the *Feast Scene*); in the woodwind instruments, we have *solos* by the *kaval, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon*, in the brass section – *solos* by the *horn*, imitating the *Romanian alphorn ("bucium")*, *glissandos* and *unisons*; the use of *mutes* and *frulato* in *trumpets*; in the percussion instruments (*the fife, the big bells, the celesta, the vibraphone, the gong, etc.*). Hence, the composer displays a wide array of fruitful choices, when it comes to using tone colors.

The central factor of the orchestration is found in timbrality. We can notice Mustea's generous resources in processing certain sources.

The exploration of the instruments' timbral characteristics also includes the synthesis between these instrumental tone colors. The author pleads in favor of *alternating* and *combining* the tone colors. Thus he obtains new sonorities, whether archaic or with percussion or woodwind effects.

The instrumental support is also targeted on effects that suggest noise, laconic remarks, mistrust, suspicions, etc. Some scarce dramatic insertions are used, as well. His music has a certain theatrical plasticity and power of suggestion; it encourages movement and determines the pulse and dynamics of the emotions.

The composer operates with a large array of techniques, such as: sliding chromatism (through the use of *glissando*), changes in pitch (*glissandos, portamentos*), changes in tempo (*accelerando, stringendo - ritardando, rallentando*), *appoggiaturas* (which create a special dynamic plane), together with changes in dynamics and tone color, managing to create a particularly colorful, expressive and suggestive music, full of sound effects, performed with no electronic means, but only with traditional ones.

Dynamics and timbrality are essential in this work.

We could say that the author declares his interest for the meaning of tone color in music, also found in *onomatopoeia* words, which bring along precious sound information.

Certain instruments are used with the aim of attaining a dramatic effect, which emphasize, from a timbral perspective, the key points of the dramatic development (for instance, the brass section accentuates the dramatic character of certain significant moments of the opera). In order to create a colouristic effect, he uses instrumental timbres (generally, of percussion and wooden instruments), most of the times used with an illustrative or descriptive role.

The orchestration of this opera is attained based on the three types of sound production:

- solistic;
- group;
- tutti.

Here, the instruments as treated as “voices” (through the presence of solos). Therefore, we can say that a vocal music approach is used here.

Group sonorities are treated as ensembles, which affirm or combine themselves temporarily. The role of instruments evolves from total identity<sup>3</sup> towards a loss of identity.<sup>4</sup>

The author multiplies and diversifies the timbres within the instrumental groups. The composer needs this interior organization (within groups) in order to elaborate a new strategy at macro-structural level (*tutti*).

We can notice here the alternation between maximum identity–relevant in solistic passages – and timbral neutrality – within the sonorities of the groups and of the entire orchestral ensemble (in *tutti*).

The musical thinking here is revealed through the development of the timbral parameter, but, also, through the evolution of the harmonic one (e.g. *The Feast Scene* – the presence of harmonic diffuseness, through the use of an intensely chromatized sound paste, going all the way to total chromaticism).

Throughout the entire musical construction, we can find a preference for tone „color“, but also for harmonic „color“ (in the descriptive fragments).

There can also be found a playful alternation of „lights and shadows“, of dark and light shades, „thrown“ over the various tone colors. Consequently, the composer seeks color effects and he grants an important role to the selection of pure tone colors, in expressive sequences

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<sup>3</sup> The quality of being identified.

<sup>4</sup> Its non-identification within the overall sonority, due to the global complexity.

of instrumental solos or in dialogued planes, which creates interesting ratios between timbral density and rarefaction.

Hence, timbrality is the essential element of language in this opera.

From beginning to end, the entire opera is woven with leitmotifs, leit-themes, leit-harmonies and leit-timbres that provide it with unity within diversity.<sup>5</sup> As they are dipped within the spheres of musical psychology, that dramatic development of the opera is achieved.

By using the leitmotif system, Mustea performs the technique of „portrait characterization“ for each character, ensuring the organic link between the musical and dramatic development of the opera.

Alexandru Lăpușeanu’s leitmotif traverses the opera as a leading red wire, which seems to be leading and supervising the entire portrait-related development of the hero. Thanks to its nature, this leitmotif expresses the entire profoundness of his desires and of the purpose of this return to reign. It also expresses that „fixed idea“ of the ruler: „to get the peasants on his side and to slain the boyars“.

The leitmotif consists of a chromatic rhythmic formula made up of three musical notes that revolve around a fundamental idea.

### E.g. 1



Stated in numerous transformations, this leitmotif expresses various inner dispositions: terror, tension, horror, suffering, sadness and regret. In essence, all of them define Lăpușeanu.

Ruxanda’s leitmotif consists of the lyrical descending scale stated by three trumpets:

### E.g. 2

<sup>5</sup> We mention them here, as they are a symphonic presence.

This leitmotif expresses the *fear, worry and concern* of the ruler's wife.

Iancu Moțoc, the ruler's „man of trust“, is also characterized musically, through harmonic patterns on the minor natural pentachord, with the fourth scale degree ascended.

These leitmotifs are entities that can be recognized throughout the opera, as they act as “*hallmarks*” or distinctive traits.

In the orchestral foreplay, which will be analyzed in the following section, we can notice the presence of two leit-themes: Lăpușneanu's “*fixed idea*” and the *motherland* leit-theme.

### The symphonic foreplay (Act I)

The *symphonic foreplay* represents the quintessence of the opera, in which two leit-themes take shape: the first one is the ruler's “*fixed idea*“, being stated in unison by the brass section. Its musical pattern reveals a state of unrest.

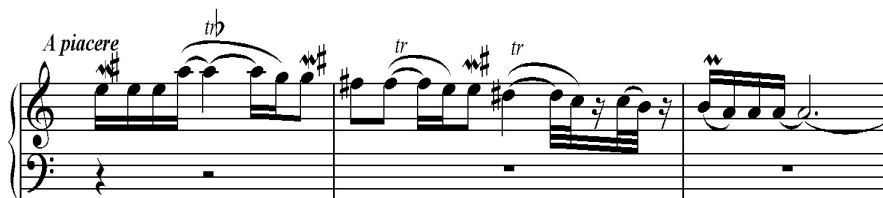
**E.g. 3**

The image shows a musical score for piano, marked "Lento assai". It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a piano (ppp) dynamic and a "ped." (pedal) marking. The music features a series of chords and melodic lines. The bass staff has a "libero" marking and a "poco a poco cresc." (poco a poco crescendo) marking. The score is written in a style typical of 20th-century orchestral music.

The second leit-theme is the *motherland* theme, or, as musicologist Serafim Buzilă names it, “*the musical emblem of Moldavia*”<sup>6</sup>. The theme is stated by a kaval solo. The kaval sounds are relevant both through their capacity to suggest a certain atmosphere, as well as through the creation of a sonorous background.

Its melody stands out thanks to the specific Romanian modal beauty. This leit-theme can be heard as a reminiscence, at the end of the opera.

<sup>6</sup> *Moldavia's Youth*, Chișinău, 6 April 1988.



In this orchestral page, the timbral dimension is cleverly enhanced, the timbral ratios being conditioned by the author's ideas and reflections. The section is also marked by the alternative manifestations of the dynamic markings.

The structure of the symphonic foreplay entails the participation of two, alternating components:

- *the orchestral development* (the ruler's leit-theme);
- *the solistic evolution of the kaval* (the *motherland* leit-theme) with syntactic bifurcations → *monody*  
→ *homophony*.

The debut of the orchestral foreplay takes place with low dynamic markings (an *introductory segment* on a pedal on *mi* (E) – in the brass section – in **ppp**), which gradually amplifies (through a *tremolo*), eventually reaching a general *cluster* in **sf** that creates effects of strain and maximum tension.

The composer highlights the following techniques:

- *classical instrumental support* (the group of string instruments: *violin I, II, viola, cello, contrabass*), made up with an alternation of timbres (*horns, trumpets, trombones, Campanelli* (glockenspiel), *harp*);
- the *melody is overlapped* upon the orchestral foundation, being rendered in melodic and rhythmic patterns of folk essence, with an *improvisational* and *cadential* character.

The melodic line of the soloist is pretty well developed, stated through interval leaps, but also through gradual movement. This theme by the kaval has a gracious, melancholic emergence, full of sorrow, chanted in the manner of playing a "*doina*" (with the characteristic turns and effect). The instrumental trajectory is built on mobile scale degrees and melodic sines across narrow ambituses.

Let us follow a fragment of this solistic discourse:

E.g. 5

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "A piacere" with a trill ornament. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of three staves. The first staff begins with a melodic line featuring a trill (tr) and a flat (b) ornament. The second staff continues the melody with sixteenth-note patterns and includes a trill (tr) and a flat (b) ornament. The third staff shows a triplet (3) and a trill (tr) ornament. The score is annotated with various musical notations including trills (tr), flats (b), and triplets (3).

In the melodic trajectory of this symphonic foreplay, we find the following modal progressions:

- Measures 1-5 – *A Aeolian mode*;
- Measure 5 – *A Phrygian* with Dorian 6<sup>th</sup> scale degree (B flat and F sharp – appoggiatura);
- Measure 6 – *A Dorian* with ascended 6<sup>th</sup> scale degree (F sharp – appoggiatura);
- Measure 7 – *A Aeolian*;
- Measures 8-11 – *A Aeolian*;
- Measure 12 – harmonic *A minor*;
- Measures 13-14 – *A Dorian*;

Reference point 1

- Measures 1-2 – *A Aeolian*;
- Measures 3-7 – *A Aeolian* with descended 5<sup>th</sup> scale degree (E flat – appoggiatura);
- Measures 8-10 – *A Aeolian* with ascended 4<sup>th</sup> scale degree (D sharp);

Reference points 2, 3, and 4 – *A Aeolian*.

In its turn, the harmonic parameter is varied and complex, passing through the following keys: *A minor* → *D major* → *E major* → *F sharp minor* → *A minor* → *C major* → *D minor*; the last segment reinstates the atmosphere of the beginning – *A minor*.

Being preoccupied with finding the proper way of combining both the European and domestic perennial indicators of tradition, Gheorghe Mustea creates a work with a synthesis vision that incorporates these elements into a manner of thinking marked by the musical traditions of the Romanian folklore, creating a musical osmosis. „This Bessarabian opera is built upon a thematic structure deeply anchored in folklore, an element that

catalyzes the expression. As the great musician *Béla* Bartók used to say about the beauty of the folk song: „With no exception, folk melodies are genuine models of artistic perfection. Within their restricted frame, I consider them masterpieces, just as a Bach fugue or Mozart sonata are, in the field of large forms. Such melodies are classical examples of how a musical idea can be expressed in a concise, laconic form...”<sup>7</sup>. The reflection of the folk ethos into opera works is attained through various solutions tackled by composers, such as: *direct citation, micro-citation, re-intonation and the creation of melodies* in the style and spirit of the Romanian folklore<sup>8</sup>.

Through his work, Gheorghe Mustea proves once more the validity of using traditional forms and the possibility to adjust them to the contemporary languages. As I mentioned in a study, “This is not merely a simple vocal-instrumental score, but also a perfect intertwining between the message of the text and the music”<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Bartók, Béla, *Notes on the Folk Song*, Editura pentru literatură și artă Publishing House, Bucharest, 1956.

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<sup>9</sup> Guțanu, Luminița, “*The Choral Outline in the Opera “Alexandru Lăpușneanu” by Gheorghe Mustea*”, published in *STUDIA UBB MUSICA*, LVII, 2, 2012 (p. 257-270).