

Postcards from a Romanian Nine-Day Week

From its very inception in 1991, the International New Music Week in Bucharest firmly established itself as one of the most significant festivals focused on contemporary art music in Romania. With no other events of this caliber in Southeastern Europe, its creation right after the fall of communism became an obvious priority for the avant-garde establishment. The New Music Week has also aged very well. For more than two decades now, a small but dedicated group of inquisitive composers and music lovers has been gathering each May in concert halls and open-air spaces, in order to experiment, discover, share and occasionally even argue about the state of the musical avant-garde.

My presence in Romania this past May was connected not only with the festival (May 19-27), but also with National University of Music and the Radio Chamber Orchestra, where I was involved in a number of projects with students, fellow composers, performers and conductors. Therefore, during this rather intense and busy visit, I had the opportunity to speak with a wide range of musicians, and learn more about the overall cultural context and avant-garde music scene in Bucharest. I have also had a substantial amount of time to reflect upon what I discovered.

Among the many composers and works featured in the festival this year, I particularly enjoyed George Balint's *Maiism*, a powerful and seductive chamber opera in concert, performed in the intimate recital hall of the Cantacuzino Palace. Equally impressive were the works and musicians of the *Ah Celan* event, presented by ensemble *devotioModerna* under the expert leadership of Carmen Carneci. Irinel Anghel and Sorin Romanescu's *Kaoss Birds in NowHere'sville* brought a refreshing departure from the standard new music concert ritual, through a wide range of stimulating sounds and images depicting an imaginary bird paradise. At the Studio Hall of the National Opera, Dan Dediu's first performance of *Momai si Mumii* in front of a full audience reminded us of the power of humor and sarcasm in music, through characters and texts from Caragiale that have yet to lose their relevance. Among so many other events, I would like to note the excellent Archaeus Ensemble concert, Doina Rotaru's marvelous *Concerto for Flute and Orchestra No. 5* – wonderfully performed by Mario Caroli, a stimulating music and photography event featuring Sabina Ulubeanu, as well as the *Serpens* show, presented by the Seducant Group, with superb music by Diana Rotaru.

As with any festival dedicated to new music, some concerts did not always impress, despite my great anticipation to reconnect with composers and artists I have come to respect over the past decade. Corneliu Dan Georgescu's multimedia event titled *De Sublimi Finis* had a strong underlying concept, but suffered from a rather poor choice of imagery and amateurish video editing. Finally, Catalin Cretu's *Lux in Tenebris* show at National University had a few episodes of religious fundamentalism that ultimately prevented the music from speaking effectively.

The quality of performances ranged from professionally produced concerts presented by some of the best musicians in Bucharest to the occasional under-rehearsed and uninvolved concerts involving performers who seemed to be tired or depressed. The multiple selection of venues and concert halls, from the good old National University and Radio halls, to the Old Princely Court, the Peasant's Museum Club or the National Theatre, reflected the two directors' desire to reach out to a wider community of music lovers and artists, not just the usual academics. All in all,

Irinel Anghel and Mihaela Vosgianian's surreal concept provided a common sense of purpose for all the events presented during this... nine-day week.

As my understanding of Romanian politics and the arts scene has gradually diminished over the past 20 years, I have become quite hesitant about making observations about festivals, trends, and new directions in music. One cannot truly understand the intricacies of a cultural panorama and management of a festival, without a grasp of the context. On the other hand, I have occasionally found myself daydreaming about what musical Bucharest might look like one day, reason for which there could be no better time to share these thoughts.

On this recent visit, I was asked quite a few times by various young composers to discuss the differences and similarities between the new music landscapes of Bucharest and Los Angeles. Instinctively, I attempted to glance back at the first editions of this festival, where I could see myself during the early 90s, attending every new music concert I could, following my mentors, trying to understand where I come from while dreaming of conquering far-away territories. I would have probably asked the same questions.

I imagine that for a young Romanian composer, one of the troubles with the new music scene is the absence of successful role models. Why would a recent high-school graduate dream of pursuing the art of music composition? In all honesty, I don't believe one could get rich from writing chamber and symphonic music in Romania these days, and the prospects of finding a job in the academia are as dim as elsewhere. If one would set out on a quest to buy new music recordings and scores in Bucharest, the task would be almost impossible to fulfill. Moreover, at these festivals, the concert halls are mostly empty. Quite often, musicians don't seem to put a lot of effort into understanding the scores, and as a result, some performances of new music appear to be nothing more than plain sight-readings. Despite great talent and a few astonishing sparks of imagination, a calm sense of hopelessness seems to have infused some of the young composers I met in masterclasses and concert halls. To a certain extent, I rediscovered my own state of mind during the early 90s, when all I wanted to do is leave.

Looking back more closely, I cannot understate the role played by this festival in my development. As early as 1991, I remember meeting the first foreign composers in my life, hearing works by Giacinto Scelsi, Olivier Messiaen, Yannis Xenakis, Tristan Murail, and many other luminary figures of the 20th century. Those concerts seemed to bring more people together, and the public appeared to be warmer and more supportive. Maybe I was just younger and more curious, so all these new people with great ideas around me seemed bigger and more illustrious.

The beauty of this festival is that it can reinvent itself every year. Perhaps a concert dedicated exclusively to electro-acoustic music could become a yearly tradition, as well as the performance of a late 20th century "classic" in every concert. I also hope that funding will allow the presence of at least one foreign ensemble and a few guest composers from abroad. At the end of the day, the lack of a clear and steady yearly budget for this festival may just be the source of all problems. Regardless of location, as the sources and nature of music sponsorship have changed for all of us over the past decade, new models will need to be invented.

Leaving aside the specifics of the Romanian arts scene, one word should be said about some of the general trends permeating contemporary culture across borders and continents. The shifting

of financial resources and media power to the individuals and institutions involved with consumer products has hurt the traditional arts world at a very deep level. Across the Atlantic, the collapse of many established music stores and bookstores can be clearly linked to the emergence of new digital media carried by more and more portable devices. The conventional publishing and music recording industries have been greatly shaken over the past decade, with more recent changes affecting the academic and traditional concert environments as well. On the other hand, those who thrive on accusing America for the current state of affairs have a rather superficial understanding of these facts and trends. What Americans do with their culture, education and mass media is what many Europeans will also do one day, with The Netherlands being one of these pioneers. It's not that the Europeans don't fall into the same traps, it's just that they can never move so fast to set these traps for themselves first.

As far as the future of arts and new music in Bucharest, the verdict is still out. Perhaps a new generation of composers will continue building upon two decades of festivals and concerts, ultimately raising the bar, energizing the lethargic performers, and taking their music to new audiences. As always, the power and beauty of progress stem from the tremendous amount of positive energy these new generations can bring to us. Finally, for this energy to become a meaningful catalyst, new role models need to be established from within, as opposed to simply importing whatever works (an not always!) in the West. If the youngest and most laborious composers can manage to carve solid new paths for their works and ideas, the future of contemporary Romanian music looks rather impressive.

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