

Introduction to Music and Art in Albania during the 20th Century

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Abstract

Albanian music, which dates back to the Albanian Independence, is characterized by two main aspects: supporting of patriotic, illuminist and democratic ideas and a model in most classical or romantic music as well as being linked to folk music. The history of last year's is followed with the oppression and dream to come close to the European Culture. During this relatively long period (almost half century), the first musical compositions were created in Albania. Initially there were some pre - professional attempts to create genuine musical compositions which had a significant role in some aspects.

First, these compositions led to the creation of the first musical genres of the Albanian music. Second, different vocal and orchestral ensembles started to include in their repertoires operas of Albanian authors and in the case of vocal operas, even with Albanian language texts. Third, the level of musical compositions was updated, from folk music towards a level that would improve decade after decade.

From the ranking of piano operas of the Albanian music that I did and showed at the end of this work, it is noticed that the first operas of our piano music sprung during the first years of 20th century. Those years were filled with endeavours and struggles for national identity, for the protection of borders from excessive greed of our neighbours or superpowers interests and also years of the first attempts to follow the steps of developed countries' cultures that surround us. So it was the time of efforts for cultivation of people and step by step creation of our cultural identity. Referring to this, the Albanian writer, aesthete, translator and teacher Ernest Koliqi wrote:

"It is an axiomatic affirmation that small nations that would not know how to organise their culture, fatally would dissolve under huge political and social exacerbations emerging today. We are moving toward formation of a politically united Europe and through sufferings and torments we are approaching to a national consciousness on which the sensation of each nation's individuality will not vanish, but will be kept more and more alive...."

In this sense main aim of this article is a short analysis of the Albanian Music and Art during the 20-th Century.

Keywords: Music, Arts, 20-th century, Albania.

Introduction

In the beginning of the 20th century in Albania, two main centres were distinguished which acted like culture's generators and thus bringing the creation and development of the Albanian music. Those centres were, firstly Shkodra as the main city of the north Albania and then Korça in the south of the country. After 1925, when Tirana became the capital of Albania, musical developments were present even there. Also some other cities, like Elbasan, Gjirokastra, Vlore, Durres, etc., which were characterized by many contacts with developed centres of the East and West, started to highlight the efforts for musical developments during the 30's. The reasons were not only found

in the high immigration rate, but also in the opening of schools (like in the case of Elbasan), or their geographical position.

Those were the times when different cultural organizations were created which were spread in the main cities organized in different formations. During those years, these important organizations became not only the school for different musical instruments but also the place to inculcate patriotism. Piano instrument, which was not mentioned or rarely written up to that time, was definitely present. In this way we can understand and argument the division of the composition of the Albanian musicians living in Albania as an integral part of our culture and those who worked and created abroad as part of foreign culture. Searching through study editions focused on this period, we notice scarce and not direct information. Filaj (1979) writes in his book:

"In a spring day of 1926 – speaking with the words of Jorgjia Truja – we (meaning Tefta Tashko and I, note. A.K.) set off to Drenova. The whole village was waiting for us. We were welcomed with love. In the afternoon, we performed the concert which we had been practicing for a long time. Tefta and I sang small parts of foreign music and folk songs of Korça. The pianist and violinist who were accompanying us were French pedagogues of Korça lyceum. Sokrat Mio played the cello, while Alekua, Tefta's brother played the flute."

Since 1917 pianos were part of Korca, not only as French lyceum teachers instruments, but also owned by rich families of this city. This fact is confirmed by memories of Boris Plumbi, who states:

"It was 1936 when I started to take piano lessons from a French professor who had studied in Strasbourg" remembers Boris Plumbi (Filaj, 1979,17).

Jacques Wincler, professor of French literature in Korça lyceum and piano accompanier of Tefta Tashko Koço, would soon become a spiritual leader of the young Albanian pianist.

"Wincler introduced me with different composition styles, from classic to impressionism and contributed more than anyone else in my education as a pianist"

Not all students who studied piano continued their profession as pianist but meanwhile professor Wincler had many students in Korça. Talking about his mother who was also passionate about music, Boris Plumbi remembers:

"My mother was grown up in Odessa, Russia, where there were old Albanian colonies. She attended the Opera House in Odessa and she had a close friend, one of the most well known Russian singers at that time and her father owned a restaurant in Odessa nearby the Opera House where piano was played."

Returning to Korça in 1913, Praksithe Odesa fell in love with Viktor Plumbi whom she married. Boris was born two years later in Sofia where his parents worked for the diplomatic mission. Praksithe Odesa projected on her son her own dream about piano, who started piano lessons at the age of 7-8.

It is documented that in 1932, Aleksii family (family of Lola Gjoka) brought from Sevastopol, Russia the piano instrument of the old daughter. That is how this event was described by the music historian Stringa (1982):

Aleksii family – remembers the well-known pianist Boris Plumbi – used to live in a small bungalow with a front yard... The simple furniture, covered with red velvet drew my attention. There was the pianoforte at the entrance and on it there were some composers portraits...."

The development of music toward composition and especially interpretation had an

important burst after the return in Albania in 1920 of Thoma Nasi the conductor of "Vatra" based in the US. This formation was founded in 1916 in Massachusetts, and it was composed by 35 Albanian immigrant instrumentalists and run by Thoma Nasi who graduated in flute in Boston Conservatory, arrived in Albania to support the Albanian war. His wife Olimpia, who was a pianist, also arrives in Albania. Together, they contributed in the artistic education of the public, especially of the new musicians. In 1925, he was appointed by Zogu, President at the time, as the composer of the Republic of Albania, when he also composed the National Anthem. Among his activities, his initiative as the main founder of the first Albanian Woodwind Orchestra is highly appreciated. Thoma Nasi left Albania in 1926 and settled back in USA, where he continued working as conductor of Woodwind Orchestras.

His musical work, although limited in some miniatures and a few massive songs, had a strong impact in the beginnings of music in Albania. His organizational activity is well noticed in the growth of patriotic feelings of the people during the difficult years of the Albanian state formation.

Following our topic, our interest and question marks fall on Olimpia, Thoma Nasi's wife who, as pianist, beside other things, created in Korça the possibility of taking lessons in this instrument, and also the beginnings of the instrumental concert life such as the concert organised by The Fine Arts Association on April 6th 1924, published by Pandi Bello. During these years in Korça, the former piano students had started to practice his profession even in public surroundings. This fact shows that the performance forces, even in the pianistic direction, had started to become a factor in the further development of the artistic life. Here, the researcher Pandi Bello adds:

"These kind of concerts were organised sometimes even by members of the French Army during the First World War."

However, we still cannot talk about the piano brand, about playing styles and other typical characteristics of piano play. In Albania, or at least in the most developed southern city, we find very few signs of the initial piano lessons, those supported only by art-lover spirit of the elite. On the other hand, in the main northern city of the country, in Shkodra, where the cultural movements were felt even earlier (the foundation of the first band in Albania – 1878), based in few left documents, we learn that the first piano instrument might have entered earlier. Searching an earlier date, we notice that the outstanding pianist and pedagogue Tonin Guraziu, who turned back from Italy in 1931 where he completed his studies (Bari, Napoli and finally in the Royal Academy of Bologna) returned in Tirana where he worked as a teacher in the State Gymnasium and Musical Institution. There is nothing written about Tonin Guraziu's piano, but we think that considering his good economic situation during that time and mostly his undeniable commitment for the profession that he never quit until he died, there must have been a pianoforte of his.

Also from Durres, we learn a piece of funny news which in essence shows the low cultural state and ignorance of the people, even of the rich. In "Drita" newspaper of 1936, an article mocked a request for the name of the piano owner to be written in large print in the show poster so it could be noticed as easily as the names of the artists Tefta Tashko and Lola Gjoka. According to all this, we come to the conclusion that, during the first decades of the 20th century, rich families of the main cities in the

country had started to follow the trend of getting close to culture and musical art throughout piano instruments import. This was made possible because of foreign pianists or piano teachers, such as French teachers in Korça and later in Gjirokastra, but also because of the return in the country of the first Albanian artists. However, we must admit that the artists who were able to display their artistic and musical abilities on the stage were still only a few and were mainly part of concert artist groups, not composers. Studies so far have not tracked any piano or keyboard opera from Palokë Kurti composer. He worked during all his life as *"The Great Master of Beano"* in his city and also, after 1880 as the leader of woodwind formations or composer of some original pieces for these formations. The first pianistic operas are created by the musician Martin Gjoka.

Conclusions

The period we took into consideration, meaning from the first tracks of musical works for piano instrument (1910) to the middle of 40-s, might be considered as the period of introduction to musical art of developed Europe and the efforts to conceive a musical culture with national character. During this period, we notice the first signs of the pianistic creation in Albania. These operas did not come as a reflection of the surrounding requests or certain groups. Those were more a reflection of the cultural and musical level of their authors and mainly as an expression of their musical passion. Kurti's sonata was written to present a certain cultural level in the field of musical composition, while Gjoka's preludes as an expression of his divine vocation and inspiration. So, even though we have some pianistic operas, those do not tell us about creative individualities, nor about the promotion of the in the piano brand in the country. But, on the other hand, they clearly tell us about the patriotic feelings inside their creative passion. Only a few of those operas might have been performed in public and even fewer influenced the public's cultural memory. However, those few concerts of Lola Gjoka, Mrs. Nasi, Mrs. L'Elise, Madam Bigou or Boris Plumbi, Tonin Guraziu and Shuk Shllaku have left indelible impressions to their numerous listeners.

So, in conclusion, pianistic operas of that period and their performance remained within closed circles of the society of that time, having little impact in their gusto or aesthetics. But, for sure, even in these forms, these pianistic musical operas, together with many operas of different genres had an impact as models to be followed from the elite of the main cities of the country. If it would have not been so, piano teachings would have not been spread considering the considerable cost. Concert halls of the time would have not been filled that much in different cities of the countries and Tefta Tashko Koço, Lola Gjoka, Mihal Ciko, Jorgjie Truja, Tonin Guraziu, Marie Kraja, etc would have not become so popular. They, together with the first composers of our professional music, might be considered as big artists in a difficult period.

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