

## The Evolution of the Bessarabian lyrical artists at the Opera Theater in Cluj and Bucharest in the Interwar Period

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**Abstract:** *After collapse of the Bessarabian Opera, a lyrical society active in Chişinău between 1918-1922, the newly established opera institutions in Cluj and Bucharest became centers of professional attraction for several singers, being the subject of a long period of migration of the artistic forces from Bessarabia. Undoubtedly, a tour of the lyrical theater, of the decades since the intersection of the last two centuries, will consolidate the contributions they have made to Romanian and European interpretive art, the large number of artists arriving on important stages of the world, starting from the Romanian lands. The approach and elucidation of the subject is all the more current, as many of the Romanian artists and implicitly Bessarabians of those times are often confused with their tradition and belonging to other cultures than the one of origin.*

**Key-words:** *Romanian Opera in Bucharest, Romanian Opera in Cluj, Basarabian Opera, interwar period, Basarabian performers.*

### 1. Introduction

The topicality of the theme and the importance of the problem addressed is supported by the fact that, so far, there is no complete study that attests and systematizes the prodigious activity of the Bessarabian lyric artists at the operas in Cluj and Bucharest from the interwar period. Existing studies do not fully cover the subject, this being treated partially or only tangentially. The investigation is motivated by the intensification of the interest for the cultural heritage of the past, and the actuality of the tendencies of full ownership of both the musical-cultural heritage and the history of development of the Bessarabian musical art, seen until

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recently with many reservations or omissions. The highlighting of the events, which represent a part of the Romanian culture and the intellectuality of Bessarabia, contributes to the systematization of the evolution of these interpreters, highlighting the significance of their presence in the Romanian lyrical theaters, the role they played in affirming and becoming the works in the cities, mentioned above, being little known on both sides of the Prut. We think it is beneficial to bring their names back today.

Starting from the thematic actuality of the investigation and its degree of research, the main purpose of this study is the approach of the impact that the activity of the Bessarabian interpreters had on the process of becoming the State Opera in Cluj and Bucharest, demonstrating, through archival materials, chronicles from the press of the time, concert from the hall programs, photographic materials, the greater importance of the presence of these artists in the Romanian opera theaters during the interwar period. The novelty and scientific originality of the investigations consists of the panoramic and synthetic vision on the activity of the Bessarabian artists and the importance, which their presence had on the scenes of the State Opera Theaters in Cluj and Bucharest. The present study, among the few of this kind, tries to complete those segments of the history and historiography of the performing art of the Republic of Moldova, which by virtue of the social-political events were treated sporadically with or without an adequate analysis of the Bessarabian vocal phenomenon, that took place on the stage of the Theaters of opera in Cluj and Bucharest.

The innovative scientific character and originality of the work is also based on a background of imagological materials discovered and analyzed by the study author, which can provide an overview of the creation, but also of the importance, which the Bessarabian opera interpreters had at lyrical theaters in Cluj and Bucharest during the interwar period.

The present work proposes a complex approach of personalities, but also of the events viewed from different angles and from different aspects, able to show and demonstrate the importance that had an activity of Bessarabian artists in Cluj and Bucharest. At the same time, the practical value of the work consists in presenting the process of affirmation of the Bessarabian artists in Cluj and Bucharest; also the author of the study wishes to demonstrate one of the essential realities in the actuality of the artistic process, namely the globalization of the cultural phenomenon in which the great artists are emblematic representatives of the country of origin.

The results of the research mainly concern important aspects of the musical-theatrical tradition in Bessarabia, completing the knowledge about an important period in the history of the Bessarabian interpretive art, a period in which several

artists, and in particular opera singers, carried out a fruitful activity on the scenes of the State lyric theaters in Romania.

## **2. Essential factors that determined the process of migration of Bessarabian lyric artists to the opera theaters in Cluj and Bucharest**

In an attempt to identify the essential factors that have determined the process of migration of Bessarabian lyric artists to the Cluj and Bucharest Opera, we have observed the phenomenon of migration at the Bessarabian intellectual category of young artists, to various prestigious cultural centers in Russia and Europe, a long process that begins starting with the second half of the 19th century. By following and analyzing the events that determined this process, we can see that, this phenomenon was not unique in its own way, and that it was generated by certain important factors that took place in a longer period of time, which we need to look at in a certain social-political and cultural context. The conjuncture created in the 20th century in Bessarabia, as well as the one until then, favored the exodus of Bessarabian lyric artists in Cluj and Bucharest, but also in many other cultural centers in Europe. The disinterest of the authorities in Chişinău, but also those in Bucharest, empowered to support and promote the activity of the local artists in Bessarabia, led to the economic bankruptcy, which eventually led to the abolition of several cultural societies, including the ones of The Bessarabian Opera Theater, organized between 1918-1923. The phenomenon of migration among the Bessarabian intellectual category, and even of young artists in various prestigious cultural centers in Russia and Europe, underwent a long process, its debut having roots in the second half of the 19th century (Iaruţchi 2011, 17-42). Among the primary causes of this process can be listed, first of all, the human potential, that Bessarabia had at that time, and not least, the political, cultural-spiritual difficulties, as well as the organizational-institutional deficiencies, with which Bessarabia was facing that period.

The social-political changes that have taken place in Russia since the second half of the nineteenth century, and then in the beginning of the twentieth century, have had a direct reflection for the social atmosphere and implicitly the cultural atmosphere in Bessarabia.

From another point of view, of a human migration, the First World War was one of the most important events of the contemporary era. Following the global conflagration (1914–1918) the world experienced a new and powerful economic and demographic revolution, and an impressive number of people sought their safety, prosperity and happiness in other countries.

The massive exodus of Bessarabian lyric artists from the interwar period, having as its destination Cluj or Bucharest, was caused by several important factors, among them we find factors of order: social, economic, political and cultural. The essential element, which made this phenomenon of migration of artistic forces possible, not only in Cluj and Bucharest, but also throughout Romania, was first of all the act of uniting: Bessarabia with Romania since 1918.

Another determining factor, perhaps more a psychological factor, was the collapse of the "Bessarabian Opera" from Chişinău, a process overlapping with the establishment of opera theaters in Cluj and Bucharest. Thus, several artistic forces from the Chişinău Opera Company sought to continue their work at other opera institutions. In this regard, it would be interesting to look at the essential causes that led to the termination of the opera company in Chisinau, a company that gathered a large number of talents, which had to take refuge on the scenes in Cluj and Bucharest.

### **3. The Bessarabian Opera Theater was an important source of voices for the State Opera Houses in Cluj and Bucharest**

The period in which the Bessarabian Opera performed its activity was not a long one, but the importance of organizing an opera company in Chişinău was a major one. Once by creating a precedent, which wanted to be repeated, and last but not least, the confidence that the Bessarabian artists have acquired, to have managed to organize a stable opera house in Chişinău. Unfortunately, this institution was not supported in its activity by authorities, moreover, not being subsidized by the government and subject to exaggerated taxes, it was impossible to exist anymore, and most artists leave Bessarabia to assert themselves on the theatrical stages of opera from all over the world and especially to the recently established State Opera Theaters in Bucharest and Cluj, where they are recognized as very valuable soloists, contributing to the affirmation of these institutions on the Romanian art firmament.

Between 1918 and 1922 in Chişinău there was not only a band of strong soloists, but also an orchestra, a choir, as well as several ballerinas. The Bessarabian Opera from Chisinau managed to gather during this period big names from the world of lyrical theater of those times. Artists such as: J. Athanasiu, A. Dicescu, M. Tobuc–Cercas, L. Lipcovscaia, G. Borelli, E. Ivoni, A. Antonovschi, G. Afanasiu, M. Zlatova, A. Costescu–Duca, R. Steiner, M. Nasta, A. Gheorghievsky, J. Bobescu, M. Bârcă, E. Massini, E. Kozîreva, G. Melnic, M. Ilinski, V. Kriher, D. Smirnova, B. Romanov, A. Obuhov, A. Gvozdeţkaia etc., all of them constituted

the heritage and at the same time the guarantee of a remarkable lyrical society, which the public from Chisinau admired. The Bessarabian Opera was an artistic phenomenon with a strong cultural impact, which managed to gather impressive artistic forces in the capital of Bessarabia. Undoubtedly, a history of the lyrical theater of the decades since the intersection of the last two centuries will consolidate the contributions made by Romanian and European interpretive art to the multitude of artists, who have populated the great scenes of the world starting from the Bessarabian regions.

Analyzing the diversity of traditions cultivated by the Bessarabian artists on the scenes of the Opera Theaters in Cluj and Bucharest, we rediscover several artistic profiles, marked by the traditions of the different schools in which these artists were trained. Thus, we discern many important supply chains for their formation:

- Russian school and tradition of performing art;
- German school and tradition of performing art;
- The Italian school and tradition of performing art;
- Romanian school and tradition of performing art.

There were also some of the singers who studied in Vienna, Odessa, Kiev or Chişinău, schools, which we consider to be tributary to cultures: German, Russian, or mixed, as in the case of Bessarabia.

Another important feature, we can follow through the professional activity of several Bessarabian singers in different cultural environments, namely: Russia, Ukraine, Italy, Germany, Austria, France, America etc. The musical traditions, and especially those of performing art, have marked not only the way in which these singers played various operatic characters, but also their entire artistic personality.

Therefore, after an analysis regarding the professional training that the Bessarabian opera singers had present in Cluj and Bucharest during the interwar period, we reached the following conclusions:

- In Cluj we find most of the Bessarabian singers trained in the Romanian singing school and tradition (Cluj, Bucharest and Iasi), except for a few cases, such as A. Dicescu (with studies in Odessa and Rome), P. Căldăraru (Chişinău and Cluj), Z. D'Arin (Moscow), N. Soculschi (Chişinău and Cluj), N. Nagacevschi (Chişinău, Moscow and Bucharest), N. Diducencu (Chişinău and Bucharest).
- However, in Bucharest, most of the Bessarabian artists were representatives of different European schools and traditions.

The careful examination of the new material, the memoirs, the periodical press of the time, the scientific literature, determines us to consider that, in the Bessarabian regions, were born a great number of musical talents and especially

opera singers, known and less known by us today, who have managed to assert themselves over time on the biggest scenes in the world, being “adopted” by various opera houses from major musical and cultural centers.

An important phenomenon pursued during the interwar period, as it is nowadays, was the globalization of the artistic act. In this process the artists were and are true ambassadors, important representatives of the traditions of the countries of origin.

#### **4. The image of Bessarabian artists through the point of view of contemporary memories, newspaper articles, archival background materials**

The fact that there is no “tangible” evidence, in our case, being audio or video recordings, posters, chronicles and memories of contemporaries remains the evidence of a substantial contribution made by these artists on the lyrical art, in the affirmation and development of the Romanian Opera Theater. Often among the names of reference, which are mentioned by different artists in their memories “on paper”, we find those of the Bessarabian singers, a fact that also proves the importance and impact that these artists have had for both: The Romanian Opera Theater in general, as well as for young performers, for whom there were true examples to follow. Thus, a great artist, a devoted servant of the Bucharest lyric scene, the baritone Alexandru Alger, remembers in his memoirs: “In the past, a young element was very difficult to distribute in a main role. The artist had to have a great vocal and performing qualities or to present a repertoire sung abroad. I have successfully performed lead roles with great singers, in extraordinary performances and premieres. I had the happiness to sing with foreign celebrities such as Lydia Lipkovska, Baratow, Maria Cebotari, Adelle Kern, Bandrowska, Jovita Fuentes, Dobranska, Ivone Gall, E. Lucezarskaia and so on”. (Smântânescu 1974, 240-241)

Regarding the debut of another consecrated soprano on the Bucharest Opera House scene, Margareta Metaxa, with the title role of La Traviata, we found a passage in the book of Grigore Constantinescu, (Constantinescu 1987, 39-40), in which the author describes the influence of Lidia Lipcovscaia’s powerful artistic personality, viewed through the hypostasis of his pedagogical talent, as a guide for young voices. Thus, “after prolonged beatings, Lipcovscaia agreed to listen to her and ... to advise her in defining the interpretation. Bel Canto lessons with Lipcovscaia are added, with another step, to the professionalization of Margarita Metaxa. Only after the teacher declared herself satisfied, M. Metaxa asked for the role to be entrusted...” (Constantinescu 1987, 39-40)

There has been entire generation which were marked by the art of another artist from the Bessarabian regions, namely Sigismund Zalevschi. His strong personality, the talent and the science he knew how to transmit to the young singers, made S. Zalevschi a true pillar of the Romanian performing opera art. Among those whose musical destiny was guided by the personality of Zalevschi also, was Nicolae Secăreanu. In his volume of memoirs, in which the artist remembers the prominent personalities of his career, he also talks about Sigismund Zalevschi: "My fourth teacher was the famous lyric artist Sigismund Zaleski, at the same time famous director. He brought through his presence on the scene of the Romanian Opera a true reversal of custom and tradition in our way of singing and playing a role ... Zalevschi was a perfect artist, gifted with multilateral talent and with a conquering physical appearance. I worked with him in several roles at the Opera Theater. Later I asked him, and he accepted, to prepare with me the role of Boris. At that time I lived the most beautiful days in art...". (Marinescu 1983, 135-137)

Over the years, S. Zalevschi enjoyed the appreciation of the most important personalities of the Romanian opera theater, the great Romanian singer George Niculescu-Basu, remembers about S. Zalevschi in his memoir, that he had a warm baritone voice, a diction perfect and a rarely encountered distinction in interpretation. The roles played by this valuable artist have been true artistic examples for a whole generation of singers trained by him on the stage of our Opera Theater.

Over the years, the mezzo-soprano M. Snejjina remember in her book about the relationship between two great artists: "When Folescu left for Italy to specialize in the role of Boris from Boris Godunov by Musorgski, he met Zalevschi, who was the most suitable teacher for this role. Between these two great artists was bound over time a friendship that lasted until death. There is talk that they were even buried in the same grave, although Zalevschi lived much longer than Folescu. At Folescu's insistence Zalevschi came to sing a few shows in Bucharest. His success was so great that the direction of the Opera House sought to retain him as much as possible. With other commitments and obligations Zalevschi left and returned to Bucharest. He was then asked to re-mount the title of Boris Godunov, which he did. This forced him to stay with us for a longer period of time. Eventually, he settled with his wife in Bucharest". (Smântânescu 1974, 320-321)

Also, N. Secăreanu wrote in his book that S. Zalevschi's contribution to the Bucharest scene was enormous. Beginning with Gh. Folescu and ending with the younger generation at that time, among whom is also the author of the collection of memories, they received through his examples, through his art and his guidance, exhortations and beautiful perspectives, which, until then, had not been seen at

The Opera House in Bucharest. Zalevski's appearance brought a complete change, "a true reversal of the cheap practices of the so-called tradition". (Secăreanu 2003)

In a time when there were not many recordings, or none at all, artists' memories reconstruct an era, mindsets, attitudes, arguments in relation to the position of each one on those issues, provide data on the setting of shows or on their colleagues from the Opera Theater, elements, which we do not find, except partially in the musical chronicles or the registers of the Opera Houses. Emil Marinescu, after the sunset of a beautiful career, wrote in his book of memories with much regret, but also much admiration, about the activity of Sigismund Zalevski at the Romanian Opera: "How many of those who heard it, knew and appreciated it on the great singer-artist and who among the music critics, who sit all day with the man in his hand, thought to write at least a few lines about his embellished and fruitful activity, which he has been doing for us in our country for over twenty years, and in the great metropolises where the gifted Polish singer left unforgettable memories? All of us who worked under his guidance, felt the nobility of his heart, his honesty, his kindness, humanity, fine education and rich culture that he put with dedication and with his whole soul in a brilliant activity of a life, end on the land of our country". (Secăreanu 2003, 212-213)

A beautiful echo from a performance by *Madama Butterfly*, supported by another famous representative of Bessarabia, M. Cebotari at the Opera in Bucharest, is also found in the article signed by G. Breazul, published in the newspaper *Acțiunea* of May 24, 1940: "No we were honored by the wonderful vocal and dramatic art of the famous bessarabian, the soprano Maria Cebotari, only at the last performance in which she appeared, in *Madame Butterfly*, on Sunday evening. What a great difference between what the sound film and the broadcast can play and what is really this great singer who carries the glory of our country on the most demanding scenes of the musical and singing drama! Because not deformed by the recording and sound transmission devices, the cultured voice must be heard, the art of singing, the masterful art of unifying the vocal registers, but especially of unifying and melting into a powerful, moving, expression of art, the whole bell of life that agitates a human soul, definitely surprised and played in the immateriality of a discrete sketched sound gesture. Is it any wonder that this winter, at Mozart week, among the most prominent German artists, honest with the participation in the festive interpretation of the work of the brilliant composer, the figure and Maria Cebotari? But?! ... "He was among his own and his own did not recognize him" - this is how it is written in the Holy Book. How much will be surprised by his, the famous singer, we do not know. I felt, however, at what meteoric heights her art was located due to the lack of ability and inability to show it to her and in front of her/ his "Old and new beaks"..." (Breazul 1966)



Following the evolution of the Bessarabian interpreters at the Romanian Opera in Cluj and Bucharest in 1920-1940, we discover a prodigious activity argued by:

- a huge number of shows with their participation;
- frequent appearances of several Bessarabian lyric artists in the central roles;
- many praiseworthy chronicles for Bessarabian artists;
- honorary distinctions with which the artistic activity was appreciated;
- the appreciation of colleagues and the public (from newspapers and monographs);
- the pedagogical activity of some of the singers from Bessarabia (a phenomenon visible especially in the activity of the Conservatory in Bucharest, or in particular);
- the importance of the Bessarabian choristers at the Romanian Opera in Cluj (both within the chorus compartment and their appearance in multiple solo compression roles);
- the presence of the Bessarabian artists in solo distributions, in the extraordinary performances of the Romanian Opera House, together with Romanian and foreign artists.

There were singers, such as: L. Lipcovscaia, S. Zalevschi, M. Arnăutu, C. Ujeicu or V. Siomin, whose creation we can say that far exceeded the usual level, their art reaching true conceptual landmarks, which stayed in time as a standard of performing of different roles difficult to match. The new ideas, another concept and the innovative way of looking at and realizing the artistic act made artists such as: A. Dicescu, L. Lipcovscaia, N. Nagacevschi, C. Ujeicu, V. Siomin, Gh. Kulibin, M. Arnăutu and not least S. Zalevschi, to be the subject of some appreciation from colleagues and music critics. The art of these musical performers has inspired generations of artists, drawing new directions in designing and performing different roles and characters. A symbiotic artistic act perfectly realized, which included theatrical and musical art, in particular vocal art, and here we talked about the influence of different schools and musical-theatrical traditions, happily combined in the theatrical activity of opera in Cluj and Bucharest.

We also note that there were Bessarabian singers, such as: M. Arnăutu, C. Ujeicu, F. Dobranscaia, V. Siomin or Gh. Znamirovschi, whose artistic activity in Cluj and Bucharest was a very long one, often blending into their entire career. The craftsmanship with which some of them approached the pedagogical activity, or with a guidance of the young artists, notices the presence of great human characters. The vast activity of each of these artists can serve as a topic for other scientific articles.

We can say that, for us today, the presence of the Bessarabian artists of that period on the scene of the Opera Houses in Cluj and Bucharest, their involvement in almost all the premieres and the resumption of performances, come to validate once again the prestige they held, being their immense value is recognized, reflected by their talent. The multitude of praises found in chronicles or in the memories of contemporaries, shows us the impressive vocal and artistic potential that Bessarabia has given to the international artistic world. The extremely detailed chronicles, although sometimes the opinions of the signatories do not completely coincide, help us today to recompose the image of those shows, the specific atmosphere of the era, with its fragmentation and achievements, outlining, at least in part, the artistic personality of the performers, who throughout decades have given life to the characters. They often created moments of great spiritual and emotional burden, thus becoming creators of the history of the Romanian opera theater. Often, with a very different character, the chronicles remain, in the absence of the recordings, unique documents of the artistic events - shows and concerts, in which the great Bessarabian artists enjoyed the public with their talent and dedication to art and to the singers, whose existence and career were often confused with the destiny of the Romanian opera theater, they were unanimously appreciated even by the most demanding chroniclers.

Unfortunately, the space and the limited format of a scientific article does not allow a broad description of the subject. But by cutting and exposing some fragments from various documentary sources, we tried to create an overview on the activity of the Bessarabian singers present on the stage of the Opera Theaters in Cluj and Bucharest, from the interbellum period, all those who contributed to the evolution and affirmation of these two emblematic Romanian institutions on the firmament of lyrical art.

## **5. Conclusions**

Concluding with the results of the study we can say that, the historical vicissitudes have led to the phenomenon of migration of several Bessarabian redoubtable artistic forces. The universality of the artistic act facilitates this phenomenon, meant to increase in the interwar period. The large number of Bessarabian singers and choristers, co-opted by the Opera Houses in Cluj and Bucharest, demonstrates a reality that is required and cannot be denied. The existence and importance of the talent of the Bessarabian singers, on the opera scenes in Cluj and Bucharest are confirmed by the impressive number of performances in which these artists

participated. In many cases their artistic path is confused with the history of the State Lyric Theaters in Cluj and Bucharest.

The massive exodus of lyric artists from Bessarabia from the interwar period, having as its destination as Cluj or Bucharest, was caused by several important factors of order: social, economic, political and cultural. Among the essential factors, which determined this phenomenon of the migration of artistic forces not only in Cluj and Bucharest, but also throughout Romania, was first of all the act of the Union of Bessarabia with Romania from 1918. But also the disinterest of the Chişinău authorities, as well as of those from Bucharest, able to support and promote the activity of the local artists in Bessarabia, all leading to the economic bankruptcy, which eventually led to the abolition of several cultural societies, including those of Bessarabian opera theater, organized between 1918-1923. As a consequence, the Bessarabian Opera Company has become an important source of voices for the State Opera Theaters in Cluj and Bucharest.

Based on the documentary materials from the National Opera Archives of Cluj and Bucharest, the collections of posters and registers, the collections of newspapers and magazines, the information collected from memorialistic books, and last but not least, the memories of the people who knew them or have information on the artistic course of the Bessarabian singers at the above-mentioned institutions, a prodigious activity is outlined, capable of attesting to the powerful impact that their presence had in Cluj and Bucharest.

A distinct feature, which we notice in the ensemble of Bessarabian lyric artists, active during the interwar period on the Cluj and Bucharest Opera scene, consists of the diversity of artistic profiles, trained and formed in different cultural centers. The cosmopolitan process, which stimulated their presence on the scene of Romanian opera theaters from the interwar period, has its roots in the school and the Russian, German, Italian tradition and so on. Thus, representatives of different schools and carriers of the traditions of the important European cultures, some of the singers from Bessarabia managed to impose themselves remarkably in the emblematic of the artistic path, which the lyrical theaters in Cluj and Bucharest had, right from their inception.

Another defining aspect that certifies the importance of the presence of Bessarabian artists at the lyrical theaters in Cluj and Bucharest was the fact that, some of them were trainers, teachers or performers of shows, thus imposing personal interpretive conceptions and visions on the artistic act, but also forming directly generations of young opera performers from these two performing institutions.

The merits of many Bessarabian artists have been appreciated and recognized over the years by the Romanian State through various titles and

decorations. For the contribution made to the promotion of culture and cultural values in Romania, artists such as E. Ivoni, M. Arnăutu, S. Zalevschi, M. Cebotari, C. Ujeicu, E. Babad, L. Babici or Gh. Znamirovski were among few artists in Romania, whose activity was mentioned with different distinctions of high appreciation from the Romanian authorities.

The pragmatic approach to the documentary material, published in the print media following the new montages on the operas scenes in Cluj and Bucharest from the interwar period, attests that many of the Bessarabian artists, such as E. Ivoni in *Tosca*, E. Lucezarscaia in *Carmen* or S. Zalevschi in *Boris Godunov*, performed iconic roles.

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