

A FEW ASPECTS REGARDING THE ACTIVITY OF TEACHER, COMPOSER AND CONDUCTOR GHEORGHE DANGA

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ABSTRACT

The history of music talks about many teachers, composers, conductors, but, like any science, it cannot fully cover what was written nor all the personalities in the world of music. In this sense, the current article offers details about one of the titans of Romanian choral music, a great self-taught, who studied only two years at the music academy in Bucharest, but being gifted by God with genius abilities, composed and conducted time for over 30 years with an incomparable lightness. I wanted to bring to light the personality of the great maestro Gheorghe Danga, to reveal more unknown aspects about the course of his artistic life, and to make him much better known in the nationally and internationally in the world of music and beyond.

Keywords: music teacher; composer; choral music, self-taught, modern era, radio choir;

INTRODUCTION

In Romania, cultural life is developing on all levels, despite the disastrous situation that intellectuals were going through during the war years and in the immediate aftermath until the peace talks were concluded. The interwar period reached a peak in terms of Romanian cultural and artistic life and it is enough to mention names such as Lucian Blaga, Liviu Rebreanu, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Constantin Brâncuşi.

Musically, the situation was at least similar, even if musicians consider as “modern era” the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Therefore, we are talking about the Enescu generation formed by George Enescu, Dumitru Georgescu Kiriac, Bélla Bartók, Mihail Jora, Martian Negrea, Sigismund Toduţă, Paul Constantinescu and many other renowned personalities. Gheorghe Danga is one of the personalities of this generation of Romanian musicians endowed with talent and altruism, who aspired to integrate Romanian culture and musical life on European stages.

1. GHEORGHE DANGA ROUMANIAN COMPOSER AND CONDUCTOR

The teacher, composer and conductor Gheorghe Danga, known both for his secular choral works and for his church choral creation for mixed and male choir, was born in Bucharest on October 1, 1905. He graduated in 1916 from primary school at Saint Sava with high grades, and high school, also at Saint Sava in Bucharest, finishing in 1921. Education was very rigorous in those times, the requirements were very high, so studying required a lot of attention and preparation.

The composer says that apart from his talent and work power, he did not own any other wealth, having to support himself from the age of 15, as his father died when he was

only 8 years old. Young Gheorghe, after finishing high school at St. Sava, began to get involved in artistic activities, so that, at only 18 years of age, we find him as a founding member of the *Dawn Society (Societății Zori de zi)* in 1923, together with several enthusiastic young people. The society was active in several directions, having sports and theater sections, and, obviously, choral music, under Danga's leadership.

After a few years, the society restricts its activity due to lack of funds, becoming the *Dawn Choral Society (Societatea corală Zori de zi)* in 1927, its soul being the young conductor Gheorghe Danga (Romanian musicians lexicon, vol.2).

In 1928 he debuted as conductor at the Romanian Athenaeum, on May 17, obviously at the head of the *Dawn (Zori de zi) choir*, of the newly founded choral society. The concert was so successful that the reviews in the newspaper Morning wrote: "... such choirs can still be found among the Czechs, among the Russians, and now, at Dawn, the choir of our society, under the leadership of Mr. Danga." Here's how, in only 5 years, the young conductor has definitively left his mark on the interpretative mastery of this choral band, after countless rehearsals, the choir being led by him since its establishment, when he was only 18 years old.

His not so smooth adolescence and work in the field of choral art matured him ahead of time, and in order to prepare himself thoroughly and theoretically, he enrolled at the Music Conservatory in 1928, where he studied harmony and counterpoint, composition and musical forms with I. N. Otescu and Victor Gheorghiu, but more in private, on his own, being more self-taught, especially when it came to conducting, for which he was allowed to take the exam for two years in 1930. He was unable to finish with a bachelor's degree, due to the fact that from November 1930 he was conscripted for military service, until April 1932. After that, we find him employed by *Romanian Star Society in Câmpina*, with some interruptions caused by the war, then by his mobilization to work in the oil industry. Câmpina archives show that he also functioned as a music teacher between 1936-1945, obviously, with the interruptions mentioned above.(Alexandru Danga, „Gheorghe Danga”- Bachelor’s degree, chapter 3). Also from here we learn about the impressive results he had together with his students, both during classes and in countless extracurricular activities. Also, the precarious situation in his family, especially after the death of his father, made the young teacher to be close to students with difficult material situation, whom he helped financially and in terms of making them grasp certain lessons and aspects in various subjects. He also offered free tutoring to these poorer students, as he called them, intervening with other colleagues, to show indulgence to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. He made time to meet students after classes and they discussed musical topics, told them about beautiful moments in the history of international music, trying to plant in their hearts the desire for knowledge, for public and self-study. At the same time, he strove to show them the advantages of artistic training, instilling in their minds and imaginations feelings of appreciation for music and interpretation, they sang much and invented simple melodies which they interpreted in different ways, from childish ideas and games to more sober and mature postures, himself being a sober and serious person.

It should be noted that conductor Gheorghe Danga was not known as a lenient and calm person, as he had high expectations and demands from professional musicians with education. He was empathetic, compassionate towards the simple and unlearned, who wanted to strive, to work intensively, because he remembered the hard times he went through from an early age, when he had to put in a lot of effort, to work to be able to support himself.

2. THE PEDAGOGICAL ACTIVITY OF TEACHER GHEORGHE DANGA

His pedagogical activity was of great help to him as a dedicated professional conductor to this mission through which, with great skill, he transmitted to the listeners many and diverse states of contemplation of the sounds full of energy, which he had also arranged on the score. The extraordinary work power, stemming from an endless desire to create, made him leave his mark everywhere he passed. Master Danga's son, Alexandru, said that where Gheorghe Danga was, a choir appeared, so that in Campina, in 1934, the *Harpsichord (Lira) choir* was founded. However, being made up mostly of officials and oil workers, helped at first by members of the *Dawn Choir*, it will change its name into the *Prahova Oil Workers Choir (Corul petroliștilor prahoveni)*. The choral tradition in the Campina being very limited, it took time for the choir to become known, but it had reached a repertoire of about 200 songs.

In 1941 he returned to Bucharest, where he conducted the *Christian Youth Association choir (Corul Asociației Creștine a Tinerilor)*. Since Danga's arrival, the choir began to sing his compositions, and the proximity to the *A.C.T. choir* is evident in the concert program on December 21, 1941, a moment dedicated to the composer and *A.C.T.* collaborator, Gheorghe Danga, who would conduct the entire concert. We notice an intense conducting activity, as between 1942-1949, the maestro was in charge of several choral groups: the *Dawn choir*, the above mentioned *Oil Workers choir*, the *Boteanu Church choir* in Bucharest, and since 1942 the *I.O.R. Choir (Romanian Optical Industry)*, the *Muntenia Choir*, where he was also employed for one year (Viorel Cosma, Musicians from Romania).

A flourishing activity at a very high, professional level begins with his employment within the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Company, at the *Radio Choir*, as deputy to maestro Dumitru D. Botez, starting with August 17, 1949 (Alexandru Danga, page 24). Here, Danga continued exploring the musical universe, approaching works by great classical music composers and collaborating with soloists and orchestra leaders of the most valuable. From 1950, he remained alone at the Radio Choir, and in 1954 he was tenured. He proved to be a good psychologist and leader of the masses, dealing intelligently with artistic and administrative problems. Thus, in a report to the radio management, politically appointed and very powerful, Danga courageously defended the interests of choristers, militating both for changing the salary levels and for the necessary logistical support. His arguments were fair and imposing, calling the *Radio Choir* a first-rate band for the party, but much lower paid than other lower bands in rank and even value. He did not hesitate to mention, whenever the case, that he was a party member and speaks in writing about these grievances he had to cope with when it came to solving the problems of the main formation of the PMR (Romanian Workers' Party).

The Radio Choir, the great "friend and foe", as he himself used to say, did not separate him from the other choral groups, for which he composed countless musical masterpieces: „*Floare roșie*”, „*Urare siderurgiștilor*”, „*Ionică brigadierul*”, and many others. The rehearsals before the concerts were long and exhausting, the choristers loved him for his involvement, but did not like him for the words he used to throw at them when in anger, being very temperamental in terms of musical-interpretative perfection. He showed extraordinary work power, traveling with the choral bands he led, rehearsing and organizing those trips, which he also took care of, all of which made the master be caught in a continuous workflow. He seemed to be guided by a divine force, because otherwise we cannot imagine when he had time to write over 400 pieces, let aside that he corresponded

with dozens of conductors of workers' choirs in the country, asking him frequently for new pieces. He was also asked for instrumental introductions to some of his compositions, or instrumentally guided pieces throughout. His activity as a teacher made him become much more patient with his students, a pedagogical acquisition very useful for working with members of amateur choirs, which he formed and led. His son, Alexandru, says that he often organized initiation and improvement courses for young conductors, and from the reports to the management of the Radio Choir we find out that he worked privately, overtime, with some of the choir members, both theory and solfeggio, as well as singing techniques, to bring and help them reach the desired interpretative level (Alexandru Danga, chapter 4).

We must mention that, from the information we have gathered from his former choristers and collaborators, especially from church choral groups for men, Gheorghe Danga was also a church choir conductor for over 30 years, starting with 1928 and until the end of his short earthly life (September 5, 1959), activating, without interruption, during this period, directly or through his closest collaborators, in the cafas of the Churches: Boteanu, Amzei and most of all at the White Church. In this direction he composed a lot, and the mastery of the liturgical compositional style make him unparalleled among the composers of religious music in our country. He did not stay long with a master from whom he could learn and copy stylistically in his works. Also, he was not influenced by Russian or classical choral harmonies, outlining his own, unmistakable style. For these reasons, when extremely bold and unheard or unknown harmonies appeared in his compositions, and the way he asked choristers to perform them was also "different", some envious contemporaries unjustly called them "dangisms", harmful to the genre. However, any new and beautiful interpretation, even if pretentious, was accepted by choristers, who sang with enthusiasm, being able to show off their vocal qualities, and the receptivity of the audience increased, in line with the artistic training.

His entire liturgical creation, as well as carols of rare beauty, are the expression of a Romanian choral creation, of balance and intonational beauty of Byzantine origin found both in church choral creation in particular, as well as in Romanian musical creation in general. In fact, all the compositional work of maestro Gheorghe Danga was animated by the feelings of the Romanian being, with all its joys and sorrows. He himself confessed that "my name, according to the population census, is George, not Gheorghe. I called myself Gheorghe, it is more Romanian and I like to be called Gheorghe, as I am known" (Alexandru Danga, page 57). We have here clear proof that he loved the people, being pervaded by overwhelming modesty, but remaining dignified in the face of professional and administrative challenges. Due to his exceptional professional results, the Romanian state rewarded him with many distinctions, orders and medals, receiving in 1957 even the title of honored artist. We cannot stop wondering, if the thread of his life had been longer, somewhere between 70-80 years of age, how many other hundreds of masterpieces would he have left us? How many choirs would he have founded? How many more international concerts and tours would have taken place under his baton?

The composer and conductor Gheorghe Danga left this world ahead of time, due to health problems magnified by the extremely busy schedule. Alexandru Ganga tells in his bachelor's thesis about diabetes that the master's wife tried to fool through recipes of very rare and healthy cakes, but after certain concerts, the conductor, together with the choir members could not stop themselves from sampling "forbidden" and dangerous sweets. Those who were close to him as apprentices continued frantically and almost obsessively the

conducting and interpretative style of the maestro, carrying on both his manner and his works. Constantin Romaşcanu was one of his closest students and friends, who tried to make known the personality of conductor and composer Gheorghe Danga (Alexandru Danga, chapter 6) However, due to the communist regime, his works were known only to a very small extent. We can no longer even talk about religious ones, as the party's directives were very clear and all artistic creations were thoroughly verified by the censorship commission.

"But as gold does not stay hidden and diamond shines when God ordains", after the fall of the communist regime, the most titled Romanian choral bands brought to light the priceless treasure of the musician who had studied only one year at the Conservatory, but composed with exceptional mastery and lightness. Thus, in turn, the *Bucharest Priests' Choir, the Radio Choir*, choirs of the Faculties of Theology and Theological Seminaries in the country, choirs and vocal groups of churches in the capital and in the country, included in the concert programs countless pieces of the Bucharest composer's creation. We always look forward with excitement and joy to carols concerts, artistic manifestations full of high spiritual feelings, due, of course, to a large extent, to the carols harmonized with great compositional mastery by Gheorghe Danga. We mention here the most famous and sung: „*Lerui mărului*” „*Linişte..*”, „*Ce vedere minunată..*”, „*Bună dimineaţa...*”, „*Domnul Iisus Hristos*”. There is no such thing as a choral band that has reached an advanced level of artistic interpretation and whose repertoire lacks the divine chords laid out in writing by this great master. Also, in the hall program of choral concerts, there have always been and will be folk works signed by the same great composer. And among them it is appropriate to mention the most famous and chosen by conductors: „*În poieniţă*”, „*Sârba în căruţă*”, „*Zamfira*”, „*Sârba pe loc*” (Dictionary of Romanian Church Music, page 228).

Of course, the compositions were not limited to carols and folk works, since to be a complete composer, religious choral pieces were also needed. Here the master excelled again, composing two whole Masses of inestimable beauty and value. We also have some *quinonic* songs on the lyrics of the psalms: „*Lord have mercy on us*”, „*Praise the Lord*”, „*Psalms 3 and 7*”. It must be said that Gheorghe Danga did not write at all simple, neither easy nor very accessible. The analysis of his works clearly shows, through the stretching of voices and the harmonic-polyphonic fabric, the claims, the expectations he had from those who dared to sing his compositions. It requires cultured voices, beautifully timbre, with great ambitus and interpretative lightness.

CONCLUSION

The musicians who analyzed his compositional work, quite few in number, rightly called him the teacher of harmony. The religious harmonies literally conquered the entire Orthodox masses and not only, his compositions being sung in performances organized by other religious cults. The creators of Romanian religious choral music have always included, either in concerts or Sunday liturgies, most of maestro Gheorghe Danga's pieces, due to the smooth harmonic gait and rhythm, movement suitable for the ecclesial setting. In this regard, priest Constantin Drăguşin stated: „*It is very important to note that all the church choral works of composer Gheorghe Danga, written for the most important liturgical moments, offer a perfect sonic ambience of a Romanian Orthodox liturgy using the most appropriate movements, as well as the melodies and harmonic-polyphonic constructions corresponding to each important moment of the Holy Liturgy. Gheorghe Danga offers true men's choral musical jewels, demonstrating perfect knowledge and understanding not only of the*

atmosphere specific to Romanian Orthodox services, but especially of the unfathomable mystery through words of the most important Orthodox service which is the Holy Liturgy. Thus, his ecclesiastical music expresses beyond words and suggests both the state of humility of the faithful and the greatness of the divine glory that we encounter in the Divine Liturgy” (Constantin Drăgușin, page 92).

We remember with great joy and nostalgia the great composer, conductor and professor Gheorghe Danga, as the maestro lives in our hearts through the generous chords and timbral colors used in his creations. We consider him to be more than a pedagogue, as he was not only a teacher of others, but he was first and foremost of his own, and due to this, he was and is enormously appreciated in the Romanian musical world. In recognition of his merits, in honor of the master composer, the house of culture in Campina bears his name, and the choir from the White Church in Bucharest, where he worked for a long time as conductor, is also called Gheorghe Danga. We hope that in the future, there will be a choral festival bearing this name, and this way, our great composer it will be even better known throughout Romania and even internationally, not only in the musical world.

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