

The Romanian Mozart Society on its 30th Anniversary History and Perspectives

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Abstract

This article is a short review of the most important achievements of the Romanian Mozart Society (RMS) in its 30 years of existence, a period so full of changes to the social and cultural life of the country that navigation was frequently a challenge. The focus is on the cultural and educational impact of the Mozart Festival, the RMS' most significant event. Primarily, I aim to give an overview of the challenges faced by the organisers of this event, speaking from my experience as a founding member who presided over the organisation for 16 years. I also look at the problems the RMS will have to deal with in the coming years to maintain the relevance of the Mozart Festival as an event in the cultural life of Romania, in particular its host city.

Keywords: Romanian Mozart Society, Francisc László, civil society, Mozart Festival, International Mozarteum Foundation, educational concerts

The founding of the Romanian Mozart Society (RMS) took place at a time when Romania was at the beginning of its transition to a democratic society after a long period of communist dictatorship. People began to enjoy the freedom brought by democratic rule, and the appearance of a new political and cultural force: civil society. It was in this context that Francisc (Ferenc) László, the Romanian

musicologist of Hungarian ethnicity, professor at the Academy of Music in Cluj, and renowned Mozart scholar, had the initiative to create a Mozart society in Romania, realising a dream that had actually been held back by the unfavourable political and cultural context for years. He was already a member of the Mozarteum Foundation in Salzburg, a position which László held on to because of his passion for Mozart's music, and for freedom, in spite of the dangers it involved for a Romanian citizen at that time. After the dramatic events of December 1989, nothing could stop him from making his dream come true. In 1991, the year of the bicentennial of Mozart's death, Professor László, together with some friends and former students, founded the RMS, and that same year the society was affiliated to the International Mozarteum Foundation. Francisc László was convinced that in the new political context the civil society would play a fundamental role in the reconstruction of Romania, and that non-governmental organisations would have a major impact on the lives of Romanians. It was a time of great expectations and excitement, which could explain why the RMS was the first Mozart community created in the former soviet bloc.

The society's statutory goal is to cultivate the work and the remembrance of Mozart in Romania. Its main activity is the annual organisation of an international music festival, whose first edition commenced on 5th December 1991, exactly 200 years after the composer's death, with a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*. Subsequent iterations have continued every year around 5th December, lasting one week, and being organised in partnership with the Transylvania Philharmonic and the Academy of Music in Cluj. It offers symphonic and chamber music concerts, performance and musicology competitions, symposia, conferences, masterclasses, and occasionally opera shows. In the beginning, the programme of the festival was focused almost exclusively on Mozart's output, and this resulted in more than 200 works by the composer being performed at the festivals, a few of them for the first time in Romania – operas such as *Idomeneo*, *La clemenza di Tito*, *Zaide*, and *La finta giardiniera*, vocal symphonic works such as *Missa Trinitatis*, or the versions completed by Robert Levin of the *Requiem* and the Great Mass in C Minor. Gradually the repertoire was diversified, and there have been premieres of contemporary works inspired by Mozart's music, but

these few exceptions aside, the programming has inclined towards works of the Classical period.

Through the years, the festival has been honoured by the presence of internationally acclaimed artists and ensembles: Robert Levin, Malcolm Bilson, Nicholas McGegan, Jaap Schröder and Jörg Widmann, among others. It must be mentioned that their presence at the festival would largely not have been possible without their great generosity, agreeing to perform for rates generally well below what they might receive elsewhere, and I take this opportunity to express my personal gratitude to them. One particular highlight was the concert given for the 2012 edition of the festival by a group of musicians active in the Camerata Salzburg orchestra, a tribute to Sándor Végh on the 100th anniversary of his birth. The wonderful musicians were delighted to visit the city where their mentor was born and play there in his memory.

In 1992, the second edition of the festival introduced an interpretation competition, designed for 5 disciplines in annual rotation – piano, violin-piano duo, piano trio, voice, string quartet. Some of the competition winners are now established artists, such as pianist and conductor Vlad Iftinca, the Arcadia string quartet, and pianist/fortepiano player Aurelia Vişovan. In 2019 the competition opened its doors to international entrants.

2010 saw the festival's programme include a concert for children for the first time, a sign of the RMS's deepening concern for its task of educating the future public of classical music, and this continues to enjoy much success with the public every year.

The RMS has continuously welcomed new members, musicians and music lovers from Romania and abroad, some of whom have become regular donors, while diplomats and members of the business community, in addition to great musicians, have been appointed honorary members of the RMS. The appointees include Sándor Végh, Karl Vötterle, Dr. Friedrich Gehmacher, Robert D. Levin, Jaap Schröder, Franz Streuber, and ambassadors of Austria Dr. Christoph Parisini and Dr. Christian Zeileissen.

But the purpose of this overview is not primarily to highlight the achievements of the RMS over the past 30 years, even though that attention would be worthwhile. As a founding member who presided over the organisation for 16 years, I would prefer to share some of my

concerns regarding the social and educational importance of the organisation, and the problems it has faced over the years. I also want to focus on some of the challenges it will have to overcome in the future. In its first years, the Mozart Festival was one of very few international events in the musical life of the city, indeed the country, and was financially supported mainly from abroad. At that time, the International Mozarteum Foundation (IMF) was highly interested in the development of a network of Mozart communities in the former communist countries. The festival was held under the patronage of the Austrian Embassy in Bucharest. The ambassadors were active supporters of the festival, some of them attended the opening concerts on multiple occasions and encouraged the Austrian firms sponsoring the event. Every year, the president of the society was invited to the annual meeting of the leaders of Mozart communities from all over the world, which takes place at the end of January as part of Mozart Week in Salzburg. The IMF covered the travel and accommodation costs of the president and an accompanying person and offered them both free entrance to six concerts during the week. But the interest of the Foundation in the Eastern European societies gradually decreased, and their financial support became less and less substantial until it finally disappeared after the 2007 accession to the European Union. The attitude of the Austrian ambassadors and officials of the embassy also changed radically, and suddenly; they stopped supporting the festival financially, and declared that the new cultural policy of the Austrian government was solely to promote contemporary Austrian culture, somehow without including Austrian performers of classical music. As the president of the RMS, I must confess that this news resulted in an unpleasant feeling, but I did understand this new vision and hoped that the progress of the local economy may mean that the Romanian authorities would take over the task of financing cultural events in the country. Unfortunately, this did not happen suddenly; it took some time before the necessary funding mechanisms were developed and we got used to the bureaucracy involved. So, for some years, a gap was produced in the funding of the festival, and for a time its very existence was in doubt. Thus, we had to reduce the festival agenda, eliminating the competition for the next two years, before the local authorities, gradually, took over the task of financing a part of the

festival, and some local sponsors became interested in supporting the event with small contributions which we very much appreciate.

Besides the financial difficulties, the main problem we faced, especially in the first fifteen years, was the impoverished infrastructure of our partner institutions, the Transylvania Philharmonic and the Academy of Music. Their instruments were very old, especially the pianos, and on top of that the Philharmonic had been left without a concert hall for 10 years, the orchestra having to play in acoustic conditions which were completely inadequate. But, despite all the difficulties, over the years the festival became an important event in the cultural life of the city. Being scheduled at the beginning of December, it was welcomed as a sort of prelude to the winter holidays, a celebration that music lovers eagerly awaited every year.

The economic development of the country, particularly Cluj, brought with it a flowering of cultural life, and thus the cultural landscape of the city became saturated by a wide range of events. The month of December in particular became steadily more congested, and with the Mozart Festival losing some of the special status it had at the beginning of its existence – now being one of many events organised at that time of the year – so we decided to move the festival to November. But this change in scheduling did not bring the expected benefits, and securing funding for the festival remains the main problem. In this new economic context, large companies are attracted by larger scale events which have developed in recent years, including Untold, Electric Castle, Jazz in the Park, and Transylvania International Film Festival (TIFF). These draw in big crowds, and thus offer huge visibility to sponsors. A small classical music festival, even of a high artistic level, is a cultural niche which cannot be as attractive to the business environment, and unfortunately local authorities have also been allocating most of their funding to events with a higher visibility.

Another issue of concern in recent years is the gradual deterioration of relations with the IMF. Trawling the Foundation's website, although there are more than 80 Mozart communities all around the world, only 30 such communities are listed, and in spite of it being one of the most active, the RMS is not among them. Most of the listed communities are from Italy, Germany and Austria, while

there are also some from the Far East – Japan and China. I do not understand the criteria this selection is based on, but I notice that from the former communist countries only the Mozart societies from the Czech Republic and the former German Democratic Republic are mentioned. At the annual meetings of the leaders of the Mozart communities, organised by the IMF in Salzburg, only a minority of representatives of the Mozart communities actually confer information about their work, and the names are always the same. At these meetings the RMS is routinely ignored despite its level of activity. I do not know exactly how that should be interpreted, but this lack of respect for our work is highly frustrating.

One moment when I thought something would change was in December 2015, when Dr. Ulrich Leisinger and Mrs. Franziska Förster, apparently excitedly, visited the 25th edition of the festival in Cluj. Then in 2016, the 25th anniversary of the RMS, at the annual meeting in Salzburg, I briefly presented the most relevant achievements of the RSM and the young pianist Aurelia Vişovan gave a short recital. Vişovan's name was misspelt in the programme, and it was a sign of things to come - there was no subsequent warming of relations.

In fact, over the years, the annual meetings in Salzburg became increasingly formal and irrelevant, with fewer and fewer participants and an even greater focus on the same core of names from Italy and Germany. And then, because of the pandemic, they stopped. I don't know if they will be resumed. It seems to me that the IMF is simply no longer interested in the Mozart communities, presumably having other priorities. In this context, it is possible that our membership of the IMF no longer makes sense.

We have created partnerships with Mozart societies in different countries. Something of a solidarity between former communist countries has seen a strong relationship develop between the RMS and the Mozart Society of Saxony (Sächsische Mozart Gesellschaft), located in Chemnitz (the former Karl-Marx-Stadt), which is probably the most active Mozart community, organising an annual festival, a concert season, many educational programmes, and even running their own record label. But in recent years their interest has shifted to new partnerships with schools from the Czech Republic

and Ukraine, and educational programmes have become a larger focus of their activity.

If I tried to sum up the previous 30 years, I would have to say that it has been a constant uphill struggle to keep the Mozart Festival alive, and from time to time one even wonders what the reason would be behind continuing. However, above all else, I remain convinced that a more generous presence of Mozart's music would raise our collective quality of life, as would a greater preponderance of classical music in general, and we need this boost more than ever in these troubled times. I am fully aware that a Mozart festival won't change the world, but I am convinced that it can make it a little better. In addition, this festival is not just a sequence of concerts performed by wonderful artists that delight audiences, it is designed to have an educational impact as well. Almost all the great artists who have performed at the festival over the years have agreed to offer free masterclasses to the students of the Academy of Music in Cluj. Before Romania joined the Erasmus program, this was actually one of the very few opportunities that Romanian students had to meet, and study with great artists and pedagogues.

Thanks to the Mozart Festival, Romanian musicians and music lovers had, for the first time, the opportunity to come into contact with current trends in Historically Informed Performance (HIP). I remember how surprised we were in 1995, when Malcolm Bilson drove to Cluj from Brussels literally towing a fortepiano in a trailer behind him. This was the first time we had seen and listened to such an instrument. Over the years, great personalities of this movement have played on the stages of the festival: Jaap Schröder, Malcolm Bilson, Robert Levin, György Vashegyi, and through their concerts and masterclasses, our students had the opportunity to become familiar with the principles of HIP. For many Romanian musicians, there was an immediate impulse to adopt this interpretative style and then to spread their knowledge. For some of them there was also an impulse to create other events which promote historical performance practice, and many ensembles and early music festivals which subsequently appeared in Romania's main cities can trace their existence back to our festival.

But it is not just the training of future professional musicians which we have considered. As mentioned previously, it is the education of the future audience of classical music concerts which has been one of our main concerns. This was the aim of the concerts for children which were included in the programme of the festival. In my opinion, educational programmes for children, and adults, should be a priority for the RMS in the coming years. I find this aspect essential at a time when musical education in schools is increasingly poor, and at the same time the values embodied by European cultural traditions are being threatened by some radical social movements. Mozart's music is one of these values, and it is our duty to preserve it. I hope that the new board of the RMS is aware of this responsibility, and that it won't be discouraged by either the IMF's lack of care, or the financial problems they will still face in the coming years. Maybe they will figure out new funding strategies, or promotional opportunities, more suited to the current cultural and socio-economic context in which the festival takes place. Perhaps changes in the format of the festival will also be necessary to make it more attractive to a new generation of listeners, and to sponsors as well. There is reason for optimism, given the solutions the new management team has found to keep the festival alive during the pandemic, so I hope that the RMS and the Mozart Festival will not just survive the years to come, but even claim a higher position in the cultural life of Romania.