

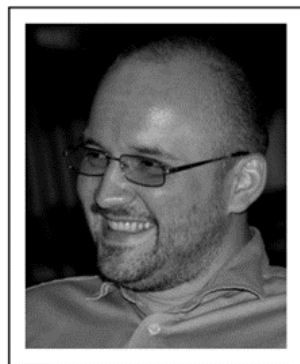
YOUTH EVERLASTING¹

CORNEL ȚĂRANU – CETINI NEGRE

[BLACK FIR TREES] *

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Șerban MARCU was born in Brașov, in 1977, and attended the High School of Fine Arts in his home town. In 1996 he was admitted to the Composition Department of the *Gheorghe Dima* Academy of Music in Cluj-Napoca, in composer Cornel Țăranu's class. After he graduated in 2001, he embarked on a teaching career at the same institution, in the Department of Composition-Conducting, teaching Harmony, Choral Arrangement and Composition. His works include instrumental music (*Balkan Toccata* for organ, *Narcissus* for solo flute), songs (*Five Songs* for mezzo-soprano and piano, on verses by Lucian Blaga, *Five Madrigals* for mezzo-soprano, clarinet and piano, on verses by Elena Maria Șorban), chamber works (*Five Bagatelles* for clarinet and string quartet, *Toccata impaziente* for violin, clarinet and piano, *Necântec* [Non Song] for bassoon and string quintet), choral works (*Cherubic Hymn*, *Tânguiri* [Laments], *The Lord's Prayer*), an oratorio (*Youth Everlasting and Life Without End*), an opera (*The Lesson*), two ballets (*Arachne* and *Orfeuridice*) and *Acteon*, a poem for chamber orchestra. His music has been performed in concerts featuring works of his own in Cluj and other cities (Bucharest, Brașov, Bistrița), as well as in some Romanian major festivals (*Cluj Musical Autumn*, *Romanian Music Festival – Iași*, *International New Music Week – Bucharest*).



ABSTRACT

This paper follows two directions: firstly, it offers a personal account of the author's apprenticeship as a student and doctoral student under the guidance of composer and professor Cornel Țăranu, and, secondly, it provides an analytical approach to certain elements of language and style used in one of the maestro's early works, namely the cycle of three songs for voice and piano, *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], on verses by the poet Lucian Blaga – still unrehabilitated by the Romanian state at the time when he courageously wrote these songs –, along with a comparison of the version for voice and piano with the version for voice and orchestra.

Keywords: Cornel Țăranu, songs, Lucian Blaga, *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], tenor, piano, orchestra

¹ *Youth Everlasting and Life Without End* is the title of a well-known Romanian fairy tale

* Translated from Romanian by Marcella Magda

It was with great pleasure and excitement that I accepted the invitation extended by composer and professor Adrian Pop to contribute with an article to the volume that celebrates maestro Cornel Țăranu's reaching the beautiful age of 86. I could choose between a historiographical/memoir-like approach and a stylistic/aesthetic analytical one or, better said, I was not able to choose, because it is difficult to talk about maestro Cornel Țăranu's works without referring to the person who is not only extremely competent, but also highly charismatic (or 'charmant', as he would probably say, using, as usual, one of his Frenchisms). So I will try to blend recollections from my student days with a series of considerations related to the compositional language used in one of my teacher's early works, strongly anchored in the tradition of maestro Sigismund Toduță's school, but in which the personal elements are already extremely obvious.

I met maestro Cornel Țăranu in my freshman year, in my first composition class. It may sound strange, but the admission system – which in 1996, when I became a student, was different from that of 20 years earlier (when a four-part harmonization for soprano and bass was required), and of course different from what is happening today – required hardly any compositional skills. The admission to the composition class was based exclusively on the expression of this option, while the real "anointing" as a student composer took place at the end of the 1st year of study, when the commission assessing the composition portfolio and the written examination (a theme with three variations on a given melody, written on the spot) was already aware of the psychological profile and character of the student, who had had a whole year at his disposal to demonstrate whether or not he was passionate, talented, hard-working and serious (the *sine qua non* of the composer's profession – if such a thing does exist). In the tiny classroom 70, there were no less than 7 of us aspirants (including a mysterious elderly gentleman, with a beard, who vanished after the first class), of whom only three survived into the 2nd year, and only two – Tudor Feraru and myself – made it to graduation.

In the course of the five years of study (what times! ... school lasted five years), we had a meandering path, which started from the minuets and polonaises in the Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach (how complicated simple things are...), and ended, after going through genres like the classical sonata, variations, rondo, romantic lied, choral folk-song arrangement, quartet, impressionist miniature, etc., with the works of Ligeti, Xenakis, Schnittke and Penderecki, among foreigners, and of Toduță, Olah, Stroe, Marbé and others, among our nationals. The maestro was always patient with us students – who had started from the comfortable warmth of the functional tonal system – as we were taking the necessary steps towards the diatonic modalism, then towards the chromatic modalism of folk inspiration, then further on towards the synthetic modal structures of the 20th century and towards a mode of thinking governed by mathematical principles, symmetry and abstraction. He would challenge us to write things that were at the edge of our comfort zone,

though without throwing ourselves unconsciously into the abyss. The diploma paper (as it was called back then) would traditionally be a symphonic, vocal-symphonic or concertante genre, involving a fairly large orchestra. I used to envy him for his ability to see, in a few seconds or in a minute, the flaws that I was not able to notice, absorbed as I was in the piece I was working on. All throughout my student days I never ceased to admire his ability to attune himself to the vibration of each piece we were working on, as well as the fact that he knew in a flash what was not “working” (an extra-musical term, but extremely plastic, suggesting that a new work is a kind of engine that has to start on the first turn of the key, or else it is just a bunch of useless junk parts): “this transition is not working out well, the shift towards A-flat major is forced”, “the end is not convincing: the piece ends, but it does not really end”, or “these two moments are not good together, they don’t get along with each other; keep them and maybe you can use them in two different pieces”. Being now in the position to teach composition to others, I often wonder what the maestro would say in my place, or if the observations I make are not related more to the superficial level and the decorative elements (sometimes clumsily used by the students), rather than to the inner and intimate substance of the piece, whose cracks, though quite significant, are certainly harder to detect.

One of the expressions that got stuck in my head – and which I have also unintentionally borrowed myself - is “it is not necessarily wrong”. In music, not everything is black and white. Most situations have different shades of grey, and the terms “better” and “not so good” are more appropriate than “right” and “wrong”. “It’s not necessarily wrong”, he would say, so as not to dampen our spirits, but we knew what that meant... that we had better look for something else, or leave it as it is only if we re-evaluate that musical moment and identify ourselves 100% with it. Most of the times, insecure as I was and eager to learn, I would look for another musical solution. Another one of his sayings was “do not change it, write another variant instead” (with the implication “...because you would more than likely ruin even what is good, and then cry over the old version” – this was in the days when compositions were written in pencil on paper, and not with the help of computers and music editing software, which allow you to easily produce successive variants of a work). Sometimes, when he saw that towards the end of the page, the bar lines were starting to stack into each other so that the final chord would barely fit in, he used to say jokingly: “you did not want to start a new page, did you?”

In fact, a certain good-natured irony (which I am trying to cultivate in my turn, in - hopefully - my own style) has always characterized him. His classes were a delight, an explosion of information and an example of seduction – the composition classes were followed, in the 4th and 5th years of study, by the stylistics ones, in which we delved into the specific elements of the early 20th-century trends. The audio musical examples – played on those terrible, physically and morally

worn-out tape recorders – and the scores were sometimes brought from the acoustic studio and from the Conservatory library, but often from his personal library, with some of them carrying dedications on the first page. The maestro used to jazz up his composition classes with references to various encounters that he had had with personalities that we knew only from books, and which would paralyse and leave us in awe for a moment: “when I showed Xenakis my score, he said that...” (well, maybe it was not exactly Xenakis, I don't remember, I am quoting from memory...), and others of the sort. We knew that when in Paris, he had attended Olivier Messiaen's classes, and so he used to tell us amusedly how Messiaen – who was known for his transcription of bird songs into music – used to bring to class and show his students small drawings of the birds he was studying, and how he would never forget to ask them back at the end of the class, making sure that none was missing. “What did he think we would do with his birds?” the maestro would say laughingly. Professor Cornel Țăranu's vocabulary was replete with Frenchisms, and he would sometimes spoil himself by throwing in a “how do you say that in Romanian? ...”. A fluent speaker of several foreign languages, he confessed that he knew a few words even in Romani, which he also exemplified with his *Nomadic Songs*, in which many such words appear. Every time I see maestro Țăranu speaking in public, I appreciate his ability to be at once serious and funny, to present things in a warm and accessible light, without raising them to unattainable heights, but also without vulgarising them.

Sometimes, though not very often, the maestro would bring to class works of his own, to illustrate certain compositional techniques. At that time, and with my level of musical training that was focused more on functional tonal music, these works seemed to me rough and hermetic, rugged and dark, although I still remember how the *Testament of the Nun Teofana* or the *Nomadic songs* charmed me from the first audition. He would almost apologize if the piece was too “beautiful”: “Well, this is the kind of thing that you can write only once” (about the *Testament*). The maestro also told us, at some point, that he was aware that his music was darker and filled of grimaces, but that this darkness came from various biographical aspects, discreetly passed over in silence. I later reconsidered these works, listening to them again and discovering the poetry that is sometimes hidden within. I remember disturbing him once, years later, in an administrative matter, when I interrupted an analysis class in a moment of silence. I had been listening behind the door, trying to catch the right moment to enter, and the music had been very beautiful. “What piece was that?” – I couldn't help myself – “I didn't recognize it... It is very beautiful”. It was his piece. He had shown it to us before, I had heard it in my student days, but I had grown up in the meantime and now I could listen to it with “new ears”.

The most precious thing he has sown in us, beyond what is called “compositional technique”, is the musical taste. Through the selection of the pieces

he made, through the way he guided the analysis, through the observations he made on our composition exercises, he showed us, without explicitly stating, the difference between value and kitsch, between profoundness and superficiality and cheapness.

Another value that he has implanted in our consciousness is the love for Romanian culture and music. Without big words or chest-thumping, he taught us how to appreciate a certain Romanian specificity, which pervades all the masterpieces of the 20th century, the period in which our composers stopped imitating Western music and sought their own ways of expression. Even today, as it is known, maestro Țăranu is involved in a praiseworthy and valuable work of musical archaeology, bringing to light school works by George Enescu, pieces that uncover the path pursued by our great composer from the European culture to the Romanian one, and then advance further into the depths of his own creative consciousness.

The work I have chosen for analysis is the cycle of three songs *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], set to verses by Lucian Blaga, because, on the one hand, it is one of the maestro's works that I adore, and, on the other, because the first of them was written in 1957, before the maestro turned 22, an age close to the age I was when the maestro left his mark on my professional growth, while the other two were written in 1958. I chose this piece because the story of its writing and interpretation reveals some of the author's character traits that are hidden beneath the layer a teacher imparts to his students – as are the memories recounted in the previous pages. *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees] is the debut work of composer Cornel Țăranu, then a fresh university graduate of maestro Sigismund Toduță's class, and is a form of rebellion against the injustice that the communist system had committed against the poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga, fallen into disgrace and considered "an idealist poet-philosopher with mystical-religious views". In 1958, after the first performance with the Philharmonic Orchestra, in its orchestral version, the piece was brought to the poet's attention, on May 9, on his very birthday. In the article written on the occasion of the centenary anniversary of Sigismund Toduță's birth, Maestro Cornel Țăranu speaks about Toduță's relationship with Lucian Blaga, adding a famous autobiographical episode, which is always worth remembering because it stands as an example of moral rectitude: "We know that in the 1950s, Blaga was allowed to publish only translations, as he was closely followed by the Securitate, while some of his close friends, such as Dr. Iubu, were even under arrest. In this context, Toduță drew closer to Blaga through significant musical gestures, such as the two songs he wrote for the poet's anniversary (in 1957). On the 9th of May, at the small restaurant run by Mrs. Bolchiș, the recording made by

Ioan Piso¹ was played to him on a heavy Soviet tape recorder. A year later, we repeated the gesture, this time with my *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], for which I was severely reprimanded by the communist ideological “bodies”. A gesture of courage and humanity, in times when such attitudes were severely frowned upon. Master Cornel Țăranu recalls, in an interview conducted in 2009 by Radu Constantinescu: “A praiseworthy review by musicologist Ilie Balea [about the concert given by the Philharmonic with *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], our note] was due to be published in the *Tribuna* magazine. Eventually, it was no longer published and its printing was suspended, because in those days a plenary meeting had taken place which had condemned mysticism and obscurantism. And I gave the local authorities of Cluj, on a plate, the opportunity to prove that such a thing should not be repeated. For two years, I was the “black sheep” in all the meetings.”²

The three songs in question are based on the poems *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees] (from the volume *Nebănuitele trepte* [The Unforeseen Steps] published in 1943), *Semnal de toamnă* [Autumn Signal] (from the volume *La cumpăna apelor* [At the Watershed], published 10 years earlier, in 1933) and *Noapte extatică* [Ecstatic Night] (from the volume *Laudă somnului* [Praise to Sleep], 1929), and so, from a chronological point of view they mark a return to the beginnings. They are not the only musical reflection of Blaga's poetry in composer Cornel Țăranu's oeuvre: in the same year, 1958, he wrote the song *Epitaf* [Epitaph], which in 1964 and 1966 was followed by the madrigals for equal voices *Dorul, dor* [Longing, Longing] and *Spune-o-ncet, n-o spune tare* [Say it Softly, Do Not Say It Loudly] and, in 1967, by the song *Întoarcere* [Return].

All three poems are pervaded by an oppressive air of autumn and death. The references to the religious universe are quite transparent: “cetini negre” [black fir trees], evoking a mourning atmosphere and the fir tree, which is the funerary symbol in the Transylvanian folk tradition, “îngerii mulți murind” [many angels dying], in the poem *Semnal de toamnă* [Autumn Signal], and “Așează-ți în cruce gândul și mânilor” [Cross your thoughts and hands], an explicit reference to the position of the deceased in the coffin. The first of the three poems, *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], has the most “folkloric” tone: perfectly symmetrical lines of eight syllables each and a simple rhyme, in couplets, while the following two poems maintain the rhyming pattern, but the lines have different lengths, showing more flexibility and fluidity.

¹ Ioan Piso gave the first performance of the cycle of songs *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], which he recorded in his book *A Cybernetic Study of Speaking and Singing*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, p. 98.

² Radu Constantinescu, interview with Cornel Țăranu in the volume *Clujul în ritm de vals imperial. Interviuuri* [Cluj in the Rhythm of an Imperial Waltz. Interviews], Editura Casa Cărții de Știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2009, p. 104

The musical language of the first song, *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], relies on a modal-chromatic structure, with open references to the Romanian folklore, perfectly in tune with the literary content. Moreover, each couplet begins with the words “black fir trees”, while the music takes over this obsession, by repeating the same musical incipit, in varied form. The tempo/expression indication is missing, leaving room for the metronome marking of *eighth note* = 92-96.

The musical score for 'Cetini negre' [Black Fir Trees], mm. 4-6, is presented in a three-staff format. The top staff is the vocal line in treble clef, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic. It features a melodic line with ornaments and appoggiaturas. The middle and bottom staves form the piano accompaniment in grand staff notation, marked with a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The accompaniment consists of repeated chords in the right hand and a moving bass line in the left hand. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/8.

Example no. 1: *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], mm. 4-6

The undulating melody is based on the *F sharp* Aeolian mode (also emphasized by the key signature with three sharps), populated by many mobile scale degrees and chromaticisms, and by augmented second leaps that add chromatic colour. The tenor line abounds in ornaments – appoggiaturas (also present in the piano part), groups of thirty-second notes –, with each melodic line cadencing on a longer note value, as in folk music. The accompaniment, initially suspended above the soloist's voice, consists of a kind of slow “drone”, repeated chords, evolving in step-by-step motion. The harmonies are typical of 20th century music: fourth chords, almost cluster-like chords with added notes (the vertical intervals of a second are never so tightly packed as to produce *clusters*). In the fourth stanza, “*Cetini negre-n lume zică / Zvonul brumelor ce pică*” [Let the black fir trees tell the world/Of the rumour of the falling frosts], the composer gives up the key signature and thus the modal centre becomes more volatile, more difficult to locate, to eventually coagulate into a *G* chromatic area. Finally, the accompaniment reaches the lower register, and from the initial discretion, after passing through moments when it doubles the voice, it ends up bursting into ample, dramatic gestures:

Example no. 2: *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], mm. 21-22

After this culmination, the song returns to the key signature with three sharps and to the initial atmosphere, while the accompaniment is supplemented with only one voice that freely imitates the melody. For the last line, in the conclusion **Più piano**, “ostenita mea furtună” [my weakened storm], the author gives up the key signature again, creating the moment of highest harmonic density, the most “nebulous” chord, the final chord (F major seventh chord with various added notes):

Example no. 3: *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees], mm. 35-36

The second song, *Semnal de toamnă* [Autumn Signal], written in **Moderato** tempo, does not create a very strong contrast with the previous one – in fact, all three songs create a unitary atmosphere, mixing melancholy with tenderness, longing with sighing, introspection with exclamation. The harmonic density is higher, but the melody maintains its meandering flow, around the same rather vague *F sharp* centre, rising to a culmination replete with chromatic tension (inverted chromaticism) and ornamentation:

Example no. 4: *Semnal de toamnă* [Autumn Signal], mm. 18-19

The relationship between the accompaniment and the solo voice could be best described as heterophonic, i.e. an imprecise, quasi duplication, with these “imprecisions” and dissonances bringing a lot of colour. Unlike the previous song, which contained bits of polyphonic treatment, here, the setting is strictly homophonic/heterophonic.

The final song, *Noapte extatică* [Ecstatic Night], creates, as the title shows, the most nocturnal sonorities: the voice is often unaccompanied, the dynamics are restrained, the accompaniment is quite sparse. Melodically, the piece exploits the ambiguity of the semitone-tone type of structures, which avoids any clear tonal centering. The vertical plane makes obsessive use of the major second, which occurs both in horizontal motion – melodies in parallel major seconds – and multiplied vertically, in cluster-like harmonic structures, and, along with the major second, parallel perfect fourths are also present.

Example no. 5: *Noapte extatică* [Ecstatic Night], mm. 34-35

The tenor line is congruent with the melodic line of the other two songs: many ornaments, exceptional rhythmic divisions that dilute the sensation of measured flow of time, and, although the gradual progression prevails, dissonant and large intervals are exploited for their expressive qualities: minor sevenths,

diminished octaves. The melody of the first stanza is repeated in varied form in the second stanza, transposed a tone higher.

Finally, a few remarks about the orchestral version. According to the manuscript, it was written between 1957 and 1958, so after the version with piano accompaniment (where the writing dates for the three songs are May 3, 1956, January 7, 1957 and April 14, 1957), and contains, in addition to the three songs, a prelude and, between the second and third song, an interlude. The two orchestral moments, though short, lend an extra sense of gravity to this version of the cycle. The orchestra is quite reduced in size: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, (surprisingly) a bass clarinet instead of the predictable bassoon, two horns, three harmonic instruments used for coloristic effect (celesta, harp, piano), percussion and strings. The prelude is, literally, a... chromatic and contorted prelude in unison¹, while the interlude is a varied repetition of the prelude, shorter and treated heterophonically.

In spite of being the work of a composer who was freshly graduated from university, the cycle of songs *Cetini negre* [Black Fir Trees] has lost none of its freshness, nor has it faded from the attention of the musical world, being scheduled for performance in 2014, on the occasion of composer Cornel Țăranu's (inconceivable, to quote the maestro himself) 80th birthday, both in the concert season of the Transylvania Philharmonic, conducted by Horia Andreescu, and with the Iași Philharmonic, under the baton of Adrian Morar, sung, in both cases, by the talented tenor Tiberius Simu.

If what matters is to leave a mark, a scratch on the face of the earth in your passage through the world, then it can be certainly said that maestro Cornel Țăranu has left an indelible furrow in the minds and souls of those who have known him – of those of us who had the privilege to be his disciples and of music lovers alike.

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¹ “Prelude in Unison” is the first movement of the *Suite No. 1 for Orchestra*, Op. 9, by George Enescu