



## REFLECTIONS UPON THE ARTISTIC EVOLUTION OF MIHAIL MUNTEAN

### REFLECȚII ASUPRA EVOLUȚIEI ARTISTICE A LUI MIHAIL MUNTEAN

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*Acest articol, cu caracter monografic este dedicat evoluției artistice a tenorului Mihail Muntean, Artist al Poporului din Republica Moldova. Articolul conține date biografice, periodizări ale activității artistice, analiză a repertoriului, a stilului interpretativ, activității regizorale, concertistice și pedagogice. Autorul articolului amintește de nume notorii din istoria teatrului liric, care au tangențe cu activitatea artistică a cântărețului: vocaliști, dirijori etc.*

The artistic fate of the tenor Mihail Muntean can serve as an undoubted argument of the theory as “the chance” plays sometimes a decisive part in man’s life. The shy and humble country boy had never thought that he would overreach not only Moldova but also Europe.

Mihail Muntean was born on August 15, 1943 in the village Criva, county Hotin (today the district Briceni). The development of the child Mihail as a personality was through the influence of his creative parents – Elizaveta and Ion Muntean. From them begins the building of the first musical impressions of the future tenor. He inherited the love for singing from his father who was singing with a rare voice of deep bass in the choir of the church in his native village. At just the age of nine Mihail loses his mother. The father was telling him that she also was singing very beautifully. Both parents managed to open to him the broad horizons of the art of song. The initiation into music begun in the neighbour village Drepcauți (here he took his degree of intermediate school), where Alexandru Mânzu who was playing well enough the accordion

and the violin become his teacher of music. The professor noticed at Mihail a lot of melodiousness and he put his heart and soul to promote the future artist. He inherited the love for folk and ecclesiastical music from his parents. The professor Alexandru Mânzu acquainted his talented pupil with classical music. More than that, the fate gave him “the chance” to meet Dumitru Blajinu, the artistic chief of the House of Culture from the village Drepcauți and the future leader of the orchestra *Folclor*. Maestro Blajinu heard him singing in a House of Culture and supported his musical education. The great tenor remembers with melancholy the songs which were resonating in his village Criva. In the majority of cases the following romances were sung: *A train has left from the station, Drive coachman, Why you took me from you* [1 p. 6].

A new period in Mihail Muntean’s life begins at the age of seventeen. In the summer of 1960, with a plywood suitcase, Mihail got on a train to Chișinău to hand in his documents at the State University at the Chemistry Faculty. But the destiny prepared for him a totally surprising turn: once he arri-

ved in Chisinau he put at his uncle who was living behind the Conservatory. He advised him to sign up at the Conservatory: “*You sing so well! Why don't you try at the Conservatory? If you don't pass you will manage to sign up at the University*”<sup>1</sup>.

The grave and serious atmosphere at the Conservatory intimidated a little bit the young Mihail. He was staring at the future students who were working on vocalization while he had no idea of musical notes! He prepared for the examination two of his most successfully songs from his repertoire: *The red wine is tasty* and *Tractor driver Ilenuta*. The greatest musicians of Moldova Grigorii Sramko and the rector Vasile Povzun which are experienced professors in this field have noticed at the modest country boy a special talent of musician and made an exception by registering him in a canto class. “*Since then I started to believe in fate*” – commented Mihail Muntean the decisive turn of his life<sup>1</sup>.

At the Conservatory Mihail begins his vocal training in the class of the professor S. Oskolkov who evaluated his voice as a *baritone* one. But this was a mistake which made suffer the student and the professor. Two years of study passed very difficult for the young singer. Instead of having the joy of “natural” interpretation without any efforts and problems Mihail had to think at the release of every sound, at the building up of every musical phrase. Tensely days of studentship followed after the success from the amateur concerts which were organized long ago. He was stiff while making his first steps in the canto theories and he was tenacious in his work. But the destiny

interferes once again with its correction: Mihail is enlisted in the army and this fact imposed to intermit his studies. He made his military service as a seaman for four years in Odesa time when he manifested himself as an amateur artist. While he was making his military service the professor who taught him (S. Oskolkov) went in Minsk and in the Conservatory from Chisinau comes from Odesa a great singer and a talented teacher Nicolae Diducenco (his true name: Diducescu). After the army he becomes his canto professor. Besides the remarkably teaching qualities, N. Diducenco proved also the qualities of a good “diagnostician”. He was the first who figured out that the student Mihail had actually a lyrical-dramatic tenor voice, a fact that lead to a cardinal change of his artistic destiny.

Due to the experience and the mastership of this professor Mihail Muntean had the opportunity to become an opera singer. Many of his achievements in the artistic and educational activity are determined by the carrying on the traditions of N. Diducenco. In the lied class M. Muntean was taught by the composer and professor A. Stârcea, an erudite and polyvalent developed musician. The possibility to practice under the guidance of high qualified specialists brought competitive results: in September 1971 Mihail Muntean graduates vividly The Institute of Arts Gavriil Musicescu and is hired as a vocalist in the troupe of The National Ballet of Moldova.

From this moment a new period begins in the life and the artistic path of the young tenor. The '70s ensued in an intense search of a proper artistic path. Mihail works with a great enthusiasm and artistic dedication performing during only six theatri-

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<sup>1</sup> Personal archive – Mihail Muntean

cal seasons 12 main parts from the most difficult ones and the first one he already presents after a half of year from his arrival in the theatrical band. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 1972 takes place the premiere of the opera *Tosca* by G. Puccini in which Mihail performs with a great success the main part of *Cavaradossi* under the direction of Eugen Platon with whom he realizes most of his operas. “*It was like the emotions took my legs and my soul. Nevertheless I was feeling like in the God’s acre*” remembers the artist<sup>2</sup>. This enactment was made due to the bandmaster Isai Alterman who prepared the stage play in numberless rehearsals. The evaluations of the audience did not delay to come. After the show in a newspaper appeared a notice, not a big but a very warm one.

After this maiden success followed many other main parts which are welcomed by the music loving audience with great enthusiasm. For each season Mihail prepares two or even four main parts. He assimilates with great mastery the stylistic and emotional polyvalence of the principal parts in the operas of P. Ceacovskii, S. Rahmaninov, N. Rimski-Korsakov, G. Puccini, G. Verdi, as those written in the XX<sup>th</sup> century (creations of T. Hrenikov and Gh. Neaga).

The ending of the theatrical season from 1977 coincided with one important event from the artistic life of M. Muntean. This year brings him victory in the competition for the right of seasons at the Milanese theatre *La Scala*. During that period there was an agreement between the USSR and Italy according to which four soviet singers were going to study canto at Milano and four Italian dancers

were going to learn ballet at Moscow. The competitions for *La Scala* was taking place at Moscow were candidates from the whole USSR were gathering. In one of his interviews the artist said: “*I became who I had to become – despite everything...*”<sup>2</sup>. It was always his dream to go to *La Scala* which was the global citadel of the canto art. Many from the musical environment had the fear when seeing him so insistent, full of talent and artistic ambitions that “*this stubborn Moldavian could cross the way of many others...*” [2, p. 142]. Two of the previous attempts to go to Milano ended with a denial while at the third attempt his candidature was accepted (in the absence of his enemies). That season become his basic school of the formation of his artistic and methodical skills which he keeps since today.

In 1977 the young Moldavian had the great chance to assist at the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the theatre *La Scala*. Mihail was an eye witness of the creative process of the masters P. Domingo, L. Pavarotti, M. Frini, J. Carreras, M. Caballe as of the famous singers from Russia: E. Obraztova, E. Nestrenco. At Milano he had the luck to study at the famous singer Gina Cigna who managed to open integrally the abilities of the Moldavian singer. Another dedicated musician, the master of performance Renato Pastorino who co-operated with the famous Franco Corelli has also considerably contributed at this process. He had the chance to assist in the lodge of the notable P. Dominigo. This is what the artist remembers from those days: “*Even though I knew very well that you can’t disturb an artist before his performance I was curious to see with my own eyes how the preparations of this miracle called opera ta-*

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<sup>2</sup> Personal archive – Mihail Muntean

kes place. *The greatest singers were very simple people. I spoke many times with some of them and we participated in common concerts*<sup>3</sup>. He imposed to the full of his staying in the cradle of the European culture participating actively at the artistic life of the city. He assimilated avidly from the musical treasure, architecture, poetry and painting which was surrounding him. In one year he learns Italian perfectly, which came in handy during his activity as a vocalist and a teacher and now as a lyrical stage plays director. The young artist improves his mastership not only at the canto lessons but also at the multiple performances given at Milano, Rome and Parma. Here at Parma he sings in the most sacred place for each musician and namely in the museum house of the greatest Italian composer G. Verdi. For the participation at this commemorative concert M. Muntean was awarded with the *Verdi Medal of Honor*.

Along with the season in Italy ended the second period of his artistic activity which becomes a powerful stimulation in reaching new heights on the opera stage. The crossing of the '70s-'80s is the beginning of the third period in the artist's life, being regarded by the creative maturity and by the blossoming of his artistic career as by the beginning of his activity as a professor. The fast climb of the maestro is noticed in the theatrical season of 1979 when he worked out three totally different by the nature characters: the prince Calaff from *Turandot* by G. Puccini, Jose from *Carmen* by J. Bizet and knight Vodemon from *Iolanta* by P. Ceaikovski. The fruition of his artistic maturity are

highlighted by the enrichment of the repertory in opera, by the quick extension of the diapason of the theatrical and musical road shows, by the beginning of his activity as a teacher and in the last ten years by the function as a stage director of the Opera House. After the death of the famous stage director E. Platon with whom he worked a lot M. Muntean becomes the director of three stage plays: *Players*, *Masquerade*, *Turandot*, the last one was directed in Japan.

During the '80s – '90s, the singer released 13 new characters and the most of them were from Italian lyrical music records. He performs vividly the most difficult vocal parties from the operas of G. Verdi: *The Force of Destiny*, *Aida*, *Don Carlos*, *A Masked Ball*, *Nabucco*, *Othello* and *Rustic Chivalry* by P. Mascagni, *Players* by R. Leoncavallo. Beside these characters Muntean successfully made his first appearance in the operas of the Moldavian musicians in the characters of *Serghei Lazo* and *Petru Rares* from the namesake operas by D. Ghersfeld and E. Caudella.

A very important field in the artistic life of master M. Muntean represents his performance of concerts. As the singer says: "*A service in a performance fills up but even more often they enrich the mastership of an opera singer*" [3 p. 78]. The passion for the chamber music made the artist to evidence in this field actively and multidirectional on the concert stage. The artist's repertoire comprises 15 concert programs which are thematically interrelated between them and have a unique dramaturgy. The most popular programs are those of romances of Romanian writers, programs of chamber lyrics of the Russian composers and of the Ukrainian and

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<sup>3</sup> Personal archive – Mihail Muntean

Neapolitan songs. Along with his wife Galina, a pianist, a concert master and an academic interim professor at the Academy of Music, Theatre and Fine Arts he sung a lot at chamber concerts. Mihail Muntean collaborates intense with TeleRadio Moldova orchestra recording over 100 airs, romances and songs for the radio and for diffusion on TV.

The instructive-didactic field in which he displays himself as an academic professor and as the head of the Canto and opera Mastership Department becomes his favourite in the last period of time. The university class of the maestro M. Muntean registered itself as a laboratory of perfection of pusher personalities during his 25 old activities. Muntean's graduates develop as vocalists in Vienna – Ina Losi, in Bucharest – Ala Cheptine, in St. Petersburg – Metodii Bujor, in Italy – Marcel Furnica, and of course in Chisinau – Iurie Gasca, Igor Macarenco, Rodica Picireanu, Robert Hvalov.

If we ask the famous tenor which is the character he likes more he would say: "*All of them are beloved and dear to me but still the most favourite party is that of Canio from Players by R. Leoncavallo where this sacramental question sounds: "Who*

*are we – man, comics?"*"<sup>4</sup>. In 2004 in England M. Muntean was named "*the best Canio from Europe*" [2 p. 143].

M. Muntean has two children, a boy and a girl, both settled with their families in USA. His son Andrei is a professor of political science at the University of Philadelphia. Even though he did not study music, he is his ardent critic – he knows by heart all the operas in which his father sings. He has a four year namesake nephew born by his daughter Liza and lately (on 27 of April) another Mihail was born in Philadelphia, the nephew from his son Andrei.

The personality of the outstanding tenor, his multivalent activity represents a unique phenomenon in the musical culture of the Republic of Moldova.

The name of Mihail Muntean enters into the British collection of famous personalities from the world and always arises an intense interest from the part of scientific investigators and musicologists.

The lyrical-dramatic tenor M. Muntean is the founder of his own canto school, opera director, the men who carried on the Italian vocally customs and a worthily representative of the intellectual elite of Moldova in the second half of the XXth century.

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<sup>4</sup> Personal archive – Mihail Muntean

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