

# Death and Rebirth In Transylvania

## The Saga Of Rumanian Composer Nicolai Bretan

by constance walker

*"Whether my contemporaries recognize it or not, I am the first Transylvanian Rumanian composer of opera. Whether they like it or not, I will be written into the history of Rumanian music not only as a composer but also as a fighter for Rumanian music who must be contended with . . ."*

Nicolae Bretan

Despite those strong words written in 1925 Bretan just now and posthumously, is being acclaimed by critics as a force to be contended with in Rumanian music.

For 30 years Bretan remained ignored and forgotten, until his daughter vowed at her father's funeral in 1968, that the world should hear and recognize the genius of the composer.

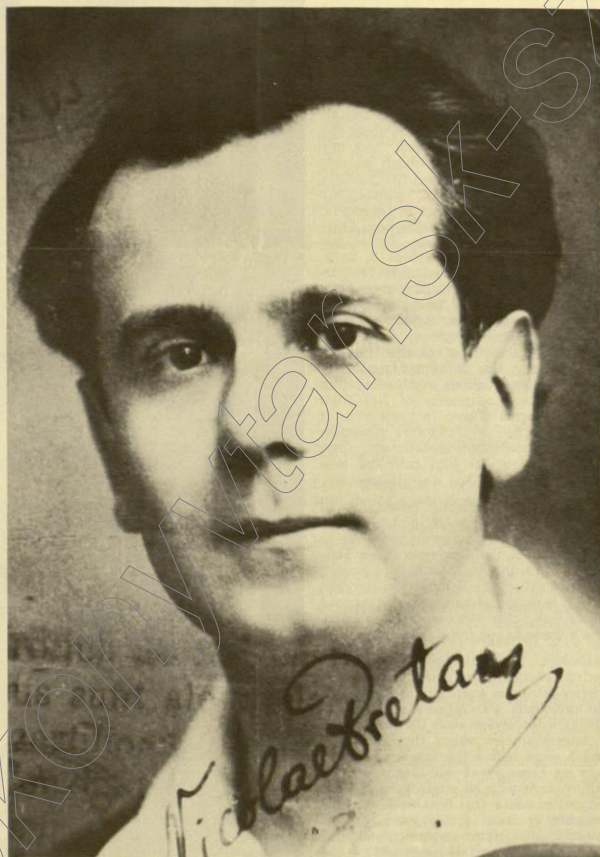
Judith Bretan LeBovit sat in her McLean home surrounded by memorabilia of her father's work. In the background was a recording, the very first one produced in the world, of Bretan's music. It was slow and sad, and even without the translation, you could tell it was a story of one who had a deep yearning for something . . . in this case, a yearning to return home to a country village.

Bretan had set to music Transylvanian poetry, a poetry of the people and background. LeBovit said her father took the best of the three cultures, Rumanian, German, and Yugoslavian, and composed music for the poems.

"He had an unerring literary sense. He chose the best poets in the three literatures. That's why his songs are so exquisite—they correspond, they are on the same wave lengths of these great poets. The music only emphasizes the poetry . . . strengthens it . . . heightens it. So, it is a double joy to hear him because it is poetry and music combined. One helps the other. And, they talk the same human language."

LeBovit talked about her father's background. The fact that he was an opera singer, a stage manager of the Cluj Opera, and a composer.

"He made the Cluj Opera to be the opera of the country," she said. "It wasn't Bucha-



Nicolae Bretan: At last long overdue recognition for the first Transylvanian Rumanian composer of opera, after 30 years of eclipse.

rest at the time . . . just like in Italy it wasn't Rome, it's always been Milano, in Rumania it was Cluj and that was equivalent to Bretan. It was Bretan who educated the newer generations of singers."

She told how she had heard from a singer who had been coached by her father, and how, through that coaching, Bretan's genius lived on anonymously.

Not until 1970 was Bretan even included among the lexicon of Rumanian composers. But, now, with the publicity the composer is getting, Bretan's works are appearing on records and in concerts.

LeBovit is ecstatic about the recognition her father is finally receiving. She recalled how happy she was the first time she heard her father's works played on the airways.

She had given tapes of twenty of her father's lieder to Edward L. Merritt, the musicologist of WAMU-FM in September, 1972.

"The next day I had the radio on and I hear, 'We are interrupting our program to present for the first time in the Western World Rumanian composer Nicolae Bretan.'

"One day it took for them to play it. And, then it took me one minute to dry my tears. I called them and I was put on hold and nine people already had called the station. 'Who is this Bretan? Give us more.' They wanted more information about the composer. So, these nine calls swelled up to hundreds and one program was given after the other.

"Then they ran out of songs because I only had twenty of the more than 200 that my father composed."

The interest shown in the Bretan music prompted Merritt to have the artists on the recording, baritone Ludovic Konya and pianist Ferdinand Weiss, come to America and give a concert at the Smithsonian Institution. Merritt wanted to record the concerts and play them on the air.

National Public Radio broadcast the concert to 200 stations in 44 states, evoking more listener response.

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### There was never, never a Bretan concert while he was alive.

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LeBovit counted off the events that rapidly followed: the first Bretan concert in Bucharest, his recognition as the "maestro of the lied," her meeting with Dr. Endre Rosta, the president of the Institute of Cultural Relations, Budapest, who honored her as the "daughter of a great composer," and who helped arrange the first all-Bretan concert in Budapest. Then, the revival of the opera, "Horia."

LeBovit then met with Ion Brad, the Undersecretary of Culture in Rumania "who helped a great deal in recognizing my father's works."

The daughter opened the program notes for a Bretan concert held at the National Academy of Science under the auspices of His Excellency Corneliu Bogdan, the Ambassa-



Judith Bretan LeBovit sits in her McLean, Va., home, amidst memorabilia of her now famous father's work: a vow at his funeral—finally blossomed in belated recognition for a genuine talent.

dor of Rumania, in 1974. Konya and Weiss were the performers. Bretan was lauded as a musical hero of his country.

Seattle Opera Company wants to include the opera as part of Rumania's participation in the Bicentennial. They're negotiating to produce "Horia" in Rumanian and English, and want LeBovit to do the translation.

National Public Radio wants to give the concerts worldwide publicity.

LeBovit likes the idea of the dual language presentations, and the fact that Rumania is recognizing Bretan. She said she was thrilled when she heard her father's music being broadcast to Rumania via Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America. "They kept telling the people in Rumania, we are giving you back your music."

This month Konya will come to America again, and perform in concerts throughout the country.

LeBovit explained why Konya is considered the best interpreter of Bretan.

"The super-human poverty . . . the suffering which comes through in Konya's voice which is so typically East European. You really can't learn it. In a way the soil produces that. That's why Konya is so great because he comes from the same soil that Bretan comes from. He understands by osmosis. He identifies with what is in the music and what is in the text."

"That's what students find so appealing," she said. "The super-human suffering." One student told her, "We can only accept it in the classical way, not if tears are flowing down. It has to be elegantly expressed . . . in the background. And, that's what Bretan's music does. Behind it all we feel the suffering but on the surface it is all very classical."

Bretan's music is spreading. Advent Records has released a recording of Konya and Weiss playing Bretan. Plans to publish his music in Rumania are being completed.

LeBovit unrolls a poster advertising the Opera Bucharest and an all-Bretan concert which was performed in November, 1975. LeBovit was there.

"It was very emotional . . . a very sad time," she said. "There was never, never a Bretan concert while he was alive."

LeBovit always believed in her father's music.

"I knew all the time that my father was a genius," she said simply. "I mean that this is no surprise to me. I always knew it. When I first saw great museums like in Vienna, or saw great paintings, I knew for the first time what great paintings were. Or when we went to Rome, what great architecture or sculptures were. Then I heard the great music performed in opera houses. Then I knew my father was as great as they. That did not come as a surprise to me.

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### Behind it all we feel the suffering.

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"What I heard there, at the best, was equal to what I heard at home. And, when I heard Schubert performed really beautifully, it was the same as I've always known.

"The surprise was that my father wasn't less than all the great composers."

LeBovit pointed to her father's picture while the Konya and Weiss recording continued.

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"I understand nothing of politics but I understand much of music; of music I could be Secretary of State.

Nicolae Bretan, 1925"

(Ludovic Konya and Pianist Martin Brekofsky will perform Saturday, March 20th, 8:00 p.m. at Tawes Recreation Hall, University of Maryland.—Ed.)

BRETAN

NICOLAE

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