

December 4, 1968--A bitterly cold day without sun. In the small graveyard of Cluj, Romania, my birthplace and the town where my father spent most of his life, there are no more than twenty persons who come to say farewell to one of Romania's leading composers. For this singer and composer there is no composition or song, save for the tape that I have brought myself, a recording made by my American husband of my father at age 76 singing some of his lieder. He is buried high up the hill, all but invisible from the main road. "Can't he be buried closer?" I ask the town's mayor. "My mother is also buried far up the slope," he responds. "It is hardly the same," I tell him. "This small graveyard someday will be famous as Nicolae Bretan's final resting place. Some day millions of people throughout the world will come to know my father and his music."

--Judith Bretan Le Bovit

NICOLAE BRETAN: SINGER, OPERA DIRECTOR, COMPOSER

Nicolae Bretan (1887-1968), who spent almost all his life within a hundred-mile radius in Transylvania, is increasingly acknowledged as a leading Romanian composer of lieder, operas, and religious music. In "Nicolae Bretan--The Emergence of a Major Composer," an article written for the United States Information Agency in January 1976, Irving Lowens says:

One of the most remarkable musical phenomena of the past five years has been the rise to international eminence of the Romanian composer, Nicolae Bretan, after nearly 25 years of total neglect in his native country and in the world at large.

Bretan's great musical talent was obvious at an early age. As a young man he studied violin, singing and composition at the Conservatory of Cluj, Romania. By 1908, his musical gifts were so evident that he was awarded a scholarship to continue his studies at the Academy of Music in Vienna. He later transferred to the Budapest Academy of Music, and graduated at the head of his class in 1912. He was offered a position with the world-famous Viennese Volksoper, but due to the impending World War he was forced to return to Romania.

Over a span of thirty years, Bretan was First Baritone of the Romanian Opera of Cluj, subsequently stage manager, occasionally conductor, and later artistic director and general manager. He sang all the major baritone opera roles, including Verdi, Puccini, Rossini, Wagner, Bizet, and Tchaikovsky. As Artistic Director he staged over 50 operas and established both the basic repertory of Romanian Opera and the Cluj Opera as the leading opera of the country. At the same time he was forced to take a municipal administrative job on the side, in order to make ends meet, thus making use of the law degree which he held in addition to his degree from the Academy of Music of Budapest.

Bretan held an eminent position in Romania's musical life not only as singer and General Manager of the Cluj Opera, but also as a composer. His opera *Luceafarul* (The Evening Star), performed in 1921, was the first to be written by a Transylvanian Romanian musician. This and other Bretan operas were mounted during the 1920s and 1930s, and *Horia* and *The Evening Star* have recently been revived in his homeland, with great success.

His three-fold expertise--singer, opera director, and composer--helped Bretan develop in his own music a variety of range of tone and coloration that makes his operas and more than 200 lieder perfect showcases for the performer. Paul Hume (*The Washington Post*) writes:

Any singer who composes will always write gratefully for the voice. Every line in Bretan's songs is one in which the singer can delight.

Bretan, who died forgotten in his homeland in 1968 at the age of 81, spent most of his life in Transylvania--"crossroads of history," meeting place of three groups separated by language and cultural traditions: Romanians, Hungarians, Germans, the Romanians forming the majority, the Hungarians a substantial minority, and the Germans a smaller minority. Bretan, who captured equally well the flavor of lyrics in all three languages, calls forth in listeners of all nationalities an extraordinary immediacy and depth of emotional response. In his songs, the music is

always rooted in the language of the text, it has an unmistakable national physiognomy, but it also expresses universal feelings, feelings that transcend national boundaries. Irving Lowens writes (in *The Washington Star-News*):

Bretan's artistry was universal--he understood and sympathized with great poets whether they were Romanian, Hungarian or German, and he set to music the verse of Mihail Eminescu, Endre Ady, or Heinrich Heine with equal humanity and penetration.

The history books will have to be rewritten. In the future, they will have to contain a chapter about this composer-singer-director from Transylvania, trapped in the struggles between Romania and Hungary for his homeland, who 'maintained a fierce pride in his mixed heritage while, at the same time, eloquently relating its cultural values to the rest of the civilized world.'

The mood of Bretan's music is one of bittersweet discontent, of sad joy, of intense involvement with the sorrows and happinesses of life. There is a touch of romance to it, a touch of irony, a touch of humor, and above all, the gift of an over-arching humanity.

Of Bretan's more than 230 lieder, approximately 100 are Romanian, 80 Hungarian, and 50 German--a subconscious reflection of the proportion of the three nationalities of Transylvania. His ability to create in three languages and three cultures comes not only from Bretan's genius to project the empathy of a classical humanist, but also from a linguistic talent that enabled him to write and translate many of his works in two and three languages.

Classical not only in his point of view but also in his achievements, Bretan as lieder composer has been compared with Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Strauss, Mahler, and Wolf. His too is a richness of melodic line joined to a strikingly economical, rigorous structure in which no detail--folkloric or psychological--is allowed to detract from the music's essential purity.

BRETAN MUSIC ENTHUSIASTICALLY RECEIVED

Ironically, it was the discovery of Bretan's music by the American public that led to a revival of interest in the composer in his native Romania and other European countries. The music of Nicolae Bretan was first introduced to the Western world in a lieder recital in December 1972 at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. The Smithsonian concert, subsequently broadcast over the National Public Radio (NPR) network of 200 stations in 44 states, was so well received that it has been followed by a long series of performances and broadcasts of Bretan's music both in the U.S. and abroad.

These broadcasts produced a profound effect. Over a short period of time, American musical consciousness incorporated a new name in the universal musical heritage.

Interest in Bretan began to snowball. On July 17, 1974, the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) devoted an entire session at its Eastern Regional Conference to Nicolae Bretan and his songs. Later that summer, the National Public Radio System, the Library of Congress, and the National Academy of Sciences sponsored baritone Ludovic Konya and pianist Ferdinand Weiss to return to the U.S. for Bretan concerts. One of these concerts, presented at the prestigious National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C., was also broadcast nationwide over the NPR network of 200 stations. While in this country, the artists taped a large number of Bretan songs for the Library of Congress Archives of Eminent Performing Artists and Composers. In November 1974, Bretan was the only composer chosen to have his music featured in three special tape presentations, with introduction and comments by the composer's daughter, at the Fiftieth Anniversary Meeting of the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), held in Houston, Texas. A recent series of Bretan concerts on the American university circuit proved so popular that regular tours are scheduled to meet the many requests. The NPR network plans four nationwide broadcasts of Bretan music during 1976.

The Voice of America and Radio Free Europe have broadcast Bretan music several times to central and eastern Europe--certainly a dramatic illustration of cross-fertilization! Bretan concerts have been held in Budapest, Hungary, and in Bucharest and all the main cultural centers of Romania. Numerous radio and TV programs, as well as newspaper and magazine articles, now pay homage to Bretan in Hungary and in his native land.

The operas *Horia* and *The Evening Star* were revived during the 1973-74 season in Romania, and *Horia* opened the 1974-75 and the 1975-76 seasons at the Cluj Opera. In the U.S., NPR featured *Horia* in a nationwide broadcast in October 1975. George London, General Director of the Opera Society of Washington, writes:

I think *HORIA* is a major work, of a quality that one does not expect from a composer still of our time.... One feels in *HORIA* a strong folkloric element, similar to works by Bartok and Kodaly.

Nicolae Bretan is living today. And he is living as he wanted to live, not just as a composer, but also as a humanist who in posterity is reuniting on a musical level people of different nationalities and religions formerly divided from one another.

COMPOSITIONS OF NICOLAE BRETAN:

Mein Liederland--230 songs set to texts of Romanian, Hungarian and German poets.

Operas: *Horia*, 4 acts (7 scenes); *Luceafarul* (*The Evening Star*), 1 act; *Golem* (*Rebellion of the Clay Man*), 1 act; *Eroii dela Rovine* (*The Heroes of Rovine*), 1 act; *Anad*, 1 act.

Religious Compositions: *Requiem*, *Praeludium*, *An Extraordinary Seder Evening* (mystery play in one act), *Prayers* and *Psalms*.

BARITONE LUDOVIC KONYA

Bretan's cause is admirably argued in Konya's artistic singing. His enunciation is impeccable and he moves with ease from effortless power to a hushed sound of great beauty. (Paul Hume, *The Washington Post*)

Konya is clearly a first class artist with a voice of exceptional beauty. (George London, General Director, The Opera Society of Washington)

Ludovic Konya, young star of Romanian, Hungarian and Austrian opera, is currently First Baritone at the Hungarian Opera in Cluj, Romania. He has represented Romania with tremendous success in singing competitions, concerts, and opera performances throughout Europe and the United States, and has sung the main baritone roles in *La Traviata*, *Così fan Tutte*, *Madame Butterfly*, *The Masked Ball*, *Attila*, *Turandot*, *Il Trovatore*, *Oedip*, *Bank-Ban*, *Carmen*, *Aida*, *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Il Tabarro*, and *Don Giovanni*. Irving Lowens (*The Washington Star-News*) writes:

Ludovic Konya is a superb lyric baritone with an exceptional sensitivity towards Bretan's simple but artful melodic lines. He has a fine, strong, masculine, flexible baritone voice which is matched in quality by solid musicianship and an attractive personality. That Bretan's music proved so affecting to all in the audience was in part due to the tremendous emotional range of Konya's artistry.

PIANIST FERDINAND WEISS

Ferdinand Weiss is presently Professor of Chamber Music at the George Dima Conservatory in Cluj. He has given well over one thousand concerts in Europe, Japan, and the United States, and has also made many recordings. Weiss has accompanied the top ranking artists of Romania, as well as many foreign artists. Irving Lowens (*The Washington Star-News*) writes:

The third miracle was that of Ferdinand Weiss, a most extraordinary pianist.... Weiss, a profound artist, gave every note he touched a singing quality all its own.

Ferdinand Weiss is (quite simply) one of the finest piano accompanists I have ever heard.

SONGS OF NICOLAE BRETAN

set to texts of Romanian and Hungarian poets

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

by JUDITH BRETAN LE BOVIT

with MARION WHITE and SALLY BAILEY

SLEEPY LITTLE BIRDS (SONNOROASE PASARELE)

Mihail Eminescu

Now they come, the sleepy birds,
To nestle close among the branches
In the cool blue glow of evening--
Sleep, my darling!

Darkness strokes the silent forest
And the spring sighs in the garden,
Lapping by the closing flowers--
Dream in peace.

Silently the swan is gliding
To his mate among the reeds--
May the angels bless your sleep,
And bless your dreaming!

Over the shimmering night
Rises the proud, pale moon.
Harmony and peace surround us--
Sleep, my darling.

LAMENT OF THE PLOW (CANTECUL PLUGARULUI)

Zaharia Bărsan

Lark, oh lark,
Tell me what you say in your song.
Do you boast of your freedom
As you soar high above me?

Ah, fly high to the heavens
And sing my woes to the sky,
Tell the clouds that I suffer,
That I yearn for days of happiness.

The earth, even the earth
Trembles, cries for the sunlight,
Cries to be freed from its yoke.
Lark, oh lark!

MOON, OH MOON...
(LUNA, LUNA...)

Octavian Goga

Moon, oh moon, you crafty star,
Why can't you keep a secret?
Now you've gone and told the stars
All my heart's desires!

Stars, they are like chatty neighbors
Spending all their time in gossip.
They have told the wind about me,
Now the village knows my grief!

LAMENT OF A YOUTH (LEGENDY KESERŐJE)

Hungarian Folklore

Once again I take my leave
To wander the hidden ways.
I cannot tell you the reasons,
But they are many and true.
I see the green banks beside me
And the bleak, black road ahead.
It is the blackness I follow
As in sorrow I march along.

FALL SLIPPED, INTO PARIS (PARISBAN JART AZ ŐSZ)

Endre Ady

I saw Autumn come to Paris yesterday.
Stealthily as a cat he stalked down Saint-Michel
Through summer's golden heat and whispering green,
Meeting me face to face, yes, face to face.

I was walking slowly toward the river Seine,
Small dry twig-songs smoldering, burning in my soul
Smoky, strange, sad, purpled,
Burning with my own death, with my own death.

Then Autumn whispered something in my ear,
And a shudder ran along all the boulevard.
Whoosh, whoosh, rushing by along the road,
There flew the jesting leaves, the jesting leaves.

Yet another moment--Summer still was there.
Then the laughing Autumn lightly disappeared.
And I, only I, knew he was here
Beneath the moaning trees, the moaning trees.

