

Music Against The Plague

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In the many web pages (in all European languages) about the historical novel *Imprimatur*¹ by the Rita Monaldi and Francesco Sorti couple, one finds extremely rare references to the role of music in this both theological and political *thriller*. The book was first released in 2002, and published in Romanian at the Humanitas Publishing House in 2004, in Geo Vasile's superb, flawless translation.

Western Europe offers the same “hermeneutic” energy to this work that it once offered to Umberto Eco's celebration at the pluricultural diffusion of his *The Name of the Rose*, a book with a great hold on the Romanian audience as well. However, the novel *Imprimatur*, which is now openly considered superior to the “fashion” launched by Eco, has a less generous reception now in Romania, apart from (as far as I am aware...) a single introduction to this veritable “literary-interdisciplinary phenomenon” in the review *România literară*. Although the intrigue is dynamically and subtly constructed and the point of the investigation much outruns for today's audience Eco's polemics with Borges on worldly books and Aristotle's presumed, and presumably lost, treatise on laughter, the public of the *Humanitas* editions still seems somewhat reserved.

Before getting close to the core of my observations about the role of music in the texture of the whole work, I will try to filter the possible reasons of this bizarre lack of appetite of Romanian readers/critics for the subject of the novel *Imprimatur* (almost none of my acquaintances, all men of letters, had any knowledge of, or enthusiasm for, this original work):

1. We have enough erudites, but very few (not even a symbolic figure of) learned men – let alone the population! – who share *in spirit and style* the “classical basis” of Western-European civilization, which is, beyond the artifices of the EU Constitution – a real truism! – a Judeo-Christian tradition on a Greek-Latin foundation, consolidated on force, expansion, and

¹ *Imprimatur* literally means “to be printed”, a term used by the Papal offices centuries ago, giving permission for typographic multiplication of any work of a secular or theological nature.

economic power, in the most authentic, and not in the least pejorative, practical sense of Machiavelli's *The Prince*.

2. Consequently, there are very few historians with a sound knowledge of Greek and Latin to be able to conduct an elementary research in the field (such knowledge in Transylvania should be compulsory...). Even fewer are familiar with the canonic rules of the Roman Catholic Church, to which the documentary novel *Imprimatur* refers continuously. Philological, historical, and musical erudition, necessarily and skillfully interwoven in the plot (sometimes excessively exhibited) is inhibiting for the commentators.
3. A chapter of the book is dedicated to the battle between the Turks and Europe, seriously threatened by the presence of the Muslims at the gates of Vienna in 1683. One finds here, based on documents impossible to deny or disregard, which the authors have investigated for ten years, a narration which does not support the mythology assimilated and suggested in school manuals ("The Romanian Principalities – Moldavia and Valachia – as a shield of Christendom at the gates of the Orient", etc.), and in vain (yet beneficially) deconstructed by open-minded scholars, like Lucian Boia, or Ovidiu Pecican, Sorin Mitu, and so on. The legend spread (among others) by Constantin Negruzzi in his short story *Sobieski și românii* (Sobieski and the Romanians) has to face now manuscripts from the archives of Vienna and the Vatican which have never or only fragmentarily been examined, and which confirm the rightfulness of Sobieski's actions as a "hero of the Western Church".¹

¹ Pages 524-525 describe the Christian and Ottoman troops in battle on September 12, 1683. The Christian ones: "On the left flank there was Charles of Lorraine, beside the Marc-Graf Hermann and the young Ludwig Wilhelm, Count von Leslie and Count Caprara, Prince Lubomirski with his armed Polish knights, and also Mercy and Tafe, the future heroes of Hungary (...). The Elector of Saxony, assisted by Feldmarschall Goltz, as well as the Elector of Bavaria with the five Wittelsbachs, were also preparing their troops. (...) the princes and sovereigns of Thuringia, the glorious Guelf and Holstein ruling houses (...), the Generals Rodolfo Baretta, Dunewald, Stirum, the Baron von Degenfeld, Károly Pálffy, and many other heroic defenders of the cause of Christ. (...) On the right, close to the Danube, the bloody Voivodes of Moldavia and Valachia, the Vizir Kara Mehmet of Diyabakir, and Ibrahim, Pasha of Buda. (emphasis mine, M.G.)

There could also be other reasons for the “indigestibility”, here in Romania, of this sumptuous, baroque, musical text, from the melancholic tone to the formal elegance of the language of chanceries, and all the way to expressions of *opera buffa*, written “for four hands” by the Monaldi–Sorti couple. For instance: the impressive number and extent of Latin quotations, which were left in the original by the authors, and therefore by the translator as well, has troubled some of the commentators of the large volume of 650 pages. Then, a further cause for envy is the originality of the forceful affirmation of this widely known book, written by a journalist, Rita Monaldi, who is at the same time a Professor of the History of Religions at the Sapienza University in Rome and the Staatsuniversität in Vienna, with a degree in the literature of Ancient Greece, and her husband, Francesco Sorti, a musicologist, specialist in the music of the 17th century, the producer of cultural shows on the RAI and Radio Vatican.

First in Boccaccio’s footsteps, then in the train of the classic British *thriller* created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie whose “recipe” is also followed by Umberto Eco in his novels, Monaldi and Sorti construct a “detective novel” starting from the isolation of the characters in an inn in Rome in the year 1683. The heroes of the adventure are quarantined in fear of the plague, which seems to have caused the death of one of the guests, Monsieur de Mourai. However, the investigation conducted by the Abbot Atto Melani with the help of a servant (the cook’s prentice) at the Donzello inn, where these unforeseen events happen, reveal that Mourai was murdered, and still other murders are being secretly planned.

From this point forward the narration branches, divides into separate sideways, in order to entangle again in the scheme of a “tapered spiral” the “solution” or “key” to which is enciphered into a musical piece. Only the end of the book allows us to discern its form and meaning

The battlefield goes through several turns of the situation, until the Imperial and Saxon armies manage to break through, and around noon the Turks are driven back towards Grinzing and Heiligenstadt. (...) The Austrian cavalry of Count Caprara and Lubomirski’s armed men defeat the Moldavians, even if with the price of harsh battles, chasing them along the Danube.” (...) “The first who entered the tent of Kara Mustafa is the King Sobieski. He gets hold of the sorrel horse of the defeated, as well as many other treasures and oriental values with which the lecherous and infidel satrap was boasting.” p. 526. Could the Romanian Principalities have been engaged into an Ottoman-style “Warsaw Treaty”, *avant la lettre*?

predicted at the very beginning in the motto selected by the authors from the work of Oswald Wirth, *Tarot*:

The resurrection of the past
The repair of the injustice endured
The rightful judgment of the descendents
Nothing is lost; the past remains
alive in the meaning it has for the future.

(*Predicting interpretations from the Arcanum
of Judgment*)

The musical piece is the *rondo*, in which the first part is repeated in couplets and it closes the whole composition, a form very popular in the 17th and 18th centuries, especially in France, then spreading to England, Germany, and Italy.¹ It is also known that in literature the *rondo* is a lyric genre, preferred also in France in the 15th and 16th centuries.²

So what is the connection between the much-praised political-theological *thriller* expanded by the novel *Imprimatur*³ and the musical *rondo*? Are there passages, chapters in the book where the analogy is explicitly possible, or is the *rondo* a kind of “zodiac” of the events, the voluntary/involuntary expression of authorial intentions? The Ottoman threat at the gates of Vienna in 1683, the battle on the Kahlenberg hill, the intrigues at the court of the Sun King, Louis XIV, the disclosure of the economic, almost usurious, schemes of Pope Innocent XI (Pope Odescalchi) and the repeated, yet failed, attempts for his canonization – what do all these have in common with the *rondo*? Finally, what could be the connections of a disease like the plague, isolating nine characters of whom no one is what he/she seems to be, with the *rondo*?

¹ Composers who “polished” the *rondo* were: Lully, Couperin, Rameau, Purcell, Georg Muffat, and also Bach in the series *Connoisseurs et Amateurs*, considered frivolous... Later Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Chopin and others also wrote *rondos*.

² It is a fixed form in fifteen verses: first stanza consisting of five verses, followed by a four-verse stanza and a six-verse stanza. The last verse of the last two stanzas is shorter (*clausula*), and it repeats the beginning of the first line of the whole poem, as a *leit motif* of the whole *rondo*. (Cf. *Dicționar de termeni literari* (Dictionary of literary terms), Bucharest: Ed. Academiei RSR, 1976, p. 387.)

³ “A masterpiece of historical novels. It has aroused some scandal because it implies the reconfiguration of European history”. “It is a *The Name of the Rose* placed in the 17th century, filled with a sense of humor and morbidity”. “The authors offer a journey at the courts of Europe while the fate of the continent is being decided in Vienna under the Ottoman threat.” etc. etc. (Quotes taken from the Web.)

The book has a preamble, an imaginary letter of the fictive bishop Mons. Lorenzo Dell'Agio, addressed to the Secretary of the Congregation for the Canonization of Saints in the Vatican, dated February 14, 2040! The text of the letter contains the subjects, the "couplets" treated in the novel. Against the background of the danger of Turkish invasion and the religious "heresy" of the Reformation, the powers of Western Europe – the Papacy by Pope Innocent XI and the French King Louis XIV – dispute their sovereignty over the "old continent".

The letter of the bishop reveals his embarrassment for not being able to sufficiently confirm the data gathered for the canonization of Innocent XI, to whom miraculous healings were attributed. In connection with this, he introduces in his imaginary epistle to the Vatican, in the purest postmodern style (Hesse, Thomas Mann, Broch, Musil – all of them long turned into history!), the very authors of the novel, mentioning their real first names: Rita and Francesco. Lorenzo Dell'Agio attaches to his letter a typescript, the novel *Imprimatur* itself, motivating the irrepressible urge of the authors to write it starting from documents. The text is a "manuscript" found by chance among eight volumes of correspondence of the Abbot Atto Melani, a real character, former *prima voce*, a *castrato* (castrated singer), diplomat and spy at the same time at the court of the "Most Christian King" of France, Louis XIV. The real or imaginary manuscript dated 1699 is the diary of the cook's prentice at the Donzello inn, putting down the events during nine days of quarantine, between September 11 and 19, 1683. It is a time of the procession of masks and their gradual disappearance, real "characters in search of a director/author", who will prove to be each of them in turn.

(Of course, the readers or various interpreters of literature, critics or cultural journalists can easily disregard the "arabesques" of the novel's texture, combining fiction and historical reality. The novel can be read in a strictly narratological way, revealing multiple semantic or semiotic levels, or as a detective novel or a historical one, unveiling the backgrounds of European politics at the dawn of modernity, the age identified by Paul Hazard in his classic study as "the crisis of European consciousness". However, even with the least attention of an engaged reader, as well as the respect for the "bookish" endeavor and laborious construction of the Monaldi and Sorti couple make us notice that the majority of the names (characters) introduced in the book also figure in histories, encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc. Otherwise it would also be

difficult to explain the scandal provoked by this work, at least in the Vatican.)

As I have said, against the background of the “European crisis”, one can easily recognize the “couplets” in the composition. Europe is not only threatened by the Turks but also by the Reformation; then, variably and mysteriously the plague appears, which disappears just as enigmatically as it appeared. The plague is recurrent in Europe up to the age of the Enlightenment (bizarre, isn’t it?), acting like today’s “mass destruction weapons”. The general vocabulary of the 16th and 17th centuries uses the word *plague* as a frequent insult or an exclamation of amazement, revolt, or discomfort (see Molière: *Don Juan*). The plague is either a salvation, or a demographical disaster, depending on its location, and – it seems – on the “occult” interests of political, economic, and religious “pressure groups”. The plague allows for moments of erotic ecstasy (in a good association of *Eros* and *Thanatos*), it encourages long feasts of the type *panem et circenses*, of recognition and obedience (in Ion Ghica’s illustration: *Ciuma lui Caragea* (Caragea’s plague). Could the plague be controlled? The novel *Imprimatur* seems to suggest so.

Another “couplet”: the Papacy versus Louis XIV, the Holiest See or the Most Christian King? The Sun King encouraging the Turks in order to consolidate his own supremacy over the West, while on the onerous road of all kinds of “financial engineerings”, Pope Odescalchi supporting the “heretics” and financing the campaign of William of Orania in England, in order to reach the same goal. France tries to manipulate with the plague, and the Pope by usury. It all seems a little too much for history once learnt and mythicized!

Finally, the gray eminencies of history also step into the picture: Nicolas Fouquet, the former superintendent of Finances under Louis XIV, but also his rival Colbert who died in the very year of the narrated events, 1683. Fouquet¹ seems not to have died in 1680 in the Pignerol Fortress, but according to some evidence of that time, three years later. Besides the king’s jealousy for Fouquet, the novel also speculates about the royal intent to intimidate the superintendent in order to obtain the secret of the “diffusion of the plague” (*secretum morbi*), and then the

¹ Fouquet, Nicolas, also called “Squirrel”, was a Maecenas of arts. He protected, among others, Molière and La Fontaine. He was arrested in 1661, condemned for peculation in 1664, and imprisoned in the Pignerol Fortress, where he is said to have died in 1680... He was the victim of Colbert’s intrigues, who was also a protector of sciences and arts, and who also fell out of grace like Fouquet because of Louvois’s intrigues.

antidote (*secretum vitae*). The old man murdered in the Donzello inn, Monsieur de Mourai, seems to be exactly Fouquet, retreated to Rome, poisoned with the serum of the plague obtained from purposefully infested mice in the subterranean galleries of the city. The next victim of the same procedure was supposed to be Pope Odescalchi, Innocent XI, for his dubious practices but also for the treason of the cause of true Christianity by supporting the “heretic” William of Orania.¹

While in Eco’s case the point of the plot of *The Name of the Rose* was to hide/find Aristotle’s manuscript, which would have destroyed the medieval myth of immanent obligatory Christian sacrifice, here in the *Imprimatur* the key to the conflicts and their solution is enciphered into a *rondo* interpreted by the musician *Devizé*, spelt today as *de Visée* (1650-1725), a guitar player, student of Corbetta, much liked at the court of France. However, the pieces interpreted by him are written in the manner of Fr. Couperin, member of a dynasty of musicians, who composed sixty *rondos*. Couperin’s pieces “are for an elite public who probably understood what escapes us today”. His works pass from realism and precision to mystery. For example: *Les Barricades mystérieuses*. As in ironic judge of Parisian society, Couperin showed a “melancholic contempt” peculiar to great talents in times of crisis.²

One of the guests of the inn, the Englishman Bedford, falls ill from the plague during quarantine. He is cured by listening to the *rondo* played by Devizé, entitled: *Les Barricades mystérieuses...* a musical piece generally attributed to Couperin.

Secretum pestis seems to have had an antidote: a *secretum vitae* which must transgress *arcanae obices*, that is, the *mysterious obstacles*. A mere novelish speculation? Could well be, but all the names and dates appear also in the documents examined by the authors, as well as in the more modest dictionaries that I have personally consulted.

“The epidemic is cyclical. (...) – Consequently the plague can never be overcome. (...) It is not so, because the cycle can be modified....”

“(...) It was time we applied Robleda’s theories in practice: the plague of the Englishman was to be treated this time with the notes of Devizé’s guitar” (...)

¹ This is how the rule of “William and Mary” started, a compromise which eliminated the divine right of the kings of England, and changed the religious configuration of the whole continent.

² Cf. *Dictionnaire de la Musique*, publié sous la direction de Marc Honegger, vol. II., Bordas, 1970, p. 1141.

“We have listened to this melody so many times – notes the servant in his diary –, desiring it just as many times. Listening to it for the fourth time, the joy of the sounds made way to a most unexpected event. Swayed by the refrain which cyclically repeated itself, I heard myself saying: what did Devizé say a couple of days ago? The alternating stanzas of the *rondo* «contain permanently renewing harmonic motifs which end unexpectedly, as if they were diverting from musical canons. And after it reaches its climax, the *rondo*’s final part suddenly begins.» And what did Abbot Melani read in Kircher’s letter? That the plague is itself cyclical, and «it has in its final lines something surprising, mysterious, incompatible with medical science: the disease, once it has reached its climax, *senescit ex abrupto*, that is, suddenly starts to disappear.

Devizé’s words describing the *rondo* were almost identical with Kircher’s words about the plague...” (p. 458-459).

In other words, the conclusion reached by the two improvised investigators, Atto Melani and the servant, is that the *Secretum vitae* is enciphered into the *rondo*. But the very story of the *rondo* as it is narrated in the novel becomes the subject of a political thriller, the “miraculous melody” contains mysteries of the palace (Fouquet, the Sun King, his wife Maria Theresa, etc.), and also mathematical and biological mysteries, because Devizé’s master, Corbetta “was excellent exactly in the art of enciphering messages into his compositions” (p. 462.) The *rondo* interpreted by Devizé was dedicated à *Mademoiselle*, the wife of Lauzun, double spy both of the King and of Queen Maria Theresa, imprisoned in the Pignerol with Fouquet in order to find out his *secretum vitae* – useful both for the King and the Queen, who hoped to have thus the possibility to elude the plans of her illustrious consort. While he was still a superintendent, Fouquet asked Kircher to have Corbetta encipher the antidote of the plague into a melody. According to the novel, Corbetta created the *rondo*, rewriting a melody already existing, which is said to have belonged to Kircher. In the prison, Fouquet entrusted the score to Lauzun, adding to it the dedication à *Mademoiselle* in order that it should reach the Queen and the enemies of the King. “The diseased diverges and returns, and finally he dies exactly when reaching the climax. As if ... that music might have spoken.”

Reality or fiction? The novel ends cyclically by a new addition of the bishop Lorenzo Dell’Agio, a minute *Addendum*, which comments on the “typescript” *Imprimatur* attached to the epistle addressed to the Papal Secretary. There can be no doubt, the authors’ endeavor (Monaldi’s

and Sorti's) was to reveal the documents vaguely (if at all) investigated, or related in a biased way, unless it was only the natural need to see the product of their long research, nothing inferior than imagined adventures for a "detective" novel (!).

The *Addendum* is then followed by *Notes* on history as it really was, offering the source of information from the libraries visited. The details of the research on the composition of the *rondo* in question are contained in the *Addendum*. The confirmation of the truth of the narrated events depended on the authenticity of the "secret of music", and thus also on the authenticity of the accusations brought against Innocent XI and the attempts to stop (or encourage) his canonization.

The argument starts from Athanasius Kircher, the German Jesuit whose work, *Magnes, sive de arte magnetica*, highly acknowledged at that time, supported the therapeutic power of music, proposing one of his melodies as "an antidote against tarantula bite" (see p. 564-565). As I have previously said, it is evident that "between the 17th and 18th centuries Europe freed itself mysteriously from its most inveterate disaster, just as Kircher promised by the two secrets".

The *rondo Les Barricades mystérieuses* was composed, according to the dictionaries, by François Couperin, but it was meant to be played on the clavichord (*Pièces de Clavecin*), and not the guitar. The work was published in 1713, that is, thirty years after the events related in the book. So, should it be fiction? And our "bishop" goes on: not one of Couperin's works resembles the *Les Barricades mystérieuses*. "Couperin composed nothing similar" (p. 567). "Scattered with daring dissonances, yearning and refined harmonies, *Les Barricades mystérieuses* has nothing to do with Couperin's serious style. In an ingenious game of echoes, anticipations and delays, the four voices of the polyphony melt together in the fine mechanics of an arpeggio. It is the *brise* style, copied by clavichord-players from lutenists. And the lute is the instrument closest to the guitar...". We remember that in the novel the *rondo* was composed by Francesco Corbetta. But Corbetta's authorship of several of his works was questioned even in his lifetime. Let us revise: Devizé (de Visée) was Corbetta's student, and he was often invited to play at the court of Louis XIV, where he met Couperin. Devizé played Couperin's compositions written for the clavichord on the guitar! It is possible that things could have happened the other way too, that is, Couperin could have taken over melodies played by Devizé, as "In their time printed music was very scarce, so that musicians had to copy with their own hands whatever interested them". (...) "And maybe one night, while Devizé let himself be

seduced by a courtesan, Couperin laid hands on that very same *rondo* with a bizarre title, thinking that he would return it on the first appropriate occasion.” (p. 568).

Ambiguities and mysteries, a real stimulus for historians and musicologists. The bubonic plague disappeared, but whatever was left to be feared took other shapes even then, in the 17th century, by now infinitely multiplied and refined. The music, that strange *rondo* exists as well, regardless of who composed it, but can one still listen to it and be healed among bombs exploding in buildings, undergrounds, buses and trains? Then, there is always the danger of false idols, more harmful than the epidemic. Even if music could have been one of the causes of the sudden disappearance of the plague, arousing the conflict of the powers in a Europe now long gone, what other cures are being “composed” today in the laboratories of civilizations?

Now, in less serious a manner, a personal solution could also be experienced instead of appointments with psychoanalysts, a procedure both cheaper and more pleasant: listening (on CD) to the mysterious *rondo* of François Couperin.

**The Pathological Nature of a Bibliography
Or
On a Bibliography – With a Non-Bibliographer’s Eyes**

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A hundred years ago the writing of a handbook was a much more prestigious endeavor than it is today. To state this as a fact, it is quite enough to take one glance at the reference room of any self-respecting old library: its shelves are burdened by series of lexicons, encyclopedias, collections, dictionaries, bibliographies, or handbooks of many volumes. Nonetheless, this is still the place from where any scholar of social sciences or the humanities starts his/her research even today. In new or modernized libraries (which, seen from where we are, still means “foreign” in the first place) all this can be accessed via electronic means, the magic words being: CD-ROM, database, Internet, and the like. The computer “sweeps away the dust” of old reference rooms – its importance is hard to be overestimated, it is much faster and more “sterile” in its