

NATIONAL CHAMBER CHOIR OF REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: HISTORY FILES

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Abstract. The National Chamber Choir (artistic director and main conductor Ilona Stepan) takes an important place in the contemporary musical heritage of the Republic of Moldova. The present article is dedicated to the history and evolution of the National Chamber Choir during the first stage of its development. This unique artistic group appeared in 2002 as the first private musical group in the Republic of Moldova thanks to the initiative and sponsorship of the Union Fenosa Cultural Foundation. Some important aspects of the National Chamber Choir's evolution are studied. Among them: crystallization of the individual style as a chamber choir; recognition on the international level related to the participation at the prestigious European choir competitions; the identification of the major stylistic directions of the choir's repertoire; the establishment of the genre palette of its repertoire: from choral miniature to large-scaled vocal-symphonic works like passion, requiem, oratorio, cantata. The Choir's programs are presented in various artistic staffs: a cappella, with piano, organ, orchestra, soloists, etc. The Choir repertoire tends to extend the limits of music of academic tradition, applying to the phenomenon of non-academic music culture: habanera, carols, spirituals, tango, jazz, etc. Thanks to the National Chamber Choir history, a special inclination towards the Spanish repertoire, and, in a broader sense, the theme of Hispanicity, is identified, representing a unique feature of this choral group.

Keywords: The National Chamber Choir, Ilona Stepan, professional choral art, Union Fenosa Cultural Foundation, Hispanicity, Javier Busto, Matías Antón Mena, A tu lado, Xavier Montsalvatge i Bassols, Conto negro.

Corul Național de Cameră al Republicii Moldova: dosare de istorie

Rezumat. Corul Național de Cameră (director artistic și prim-dirijor Ilona Stepan) ocupă un loc important în patrimoniul muzical contemporan al Republicii Moldova. Prezentul articol este dedicat istoriei și evoluției Corului Național de Cameră în prima etapă a dezvoltării sale. Acest grup artistic unic a apărut în 2002 ca primul grup muzical privat din Republica Moldova datorită inițiativei și sponsorizării Fundației Culturale Union Fenosa. Sunt studiate câteva aspecte importante ale evoluției Corului Național de Cameră. Printre acestea: cristalizarea stilului individual ca și cor de cameră; recunoașterea la nivel internațional legată de participarea la prestigioase concursuri corale europene; identificarea direcțiilor stilistice majore ale repertoriului corului; stabilirea paletei genurilor: de la miniatură corală la lucrări vocal-simfonice de amploare precum pasiunea, recviem-ul, oratoriul, cantata, suita ș.a. Programele colectivului sunt prezentate în diverse componente interpretative: a cappella, cu pian, cu orgă, cu orchestră, cu soliști etc. Repertoriul corului se extinde peste limitele muzicii academice, conținând genuri non-academice, precum: habanera, colindul, spirituals, tango, jazz etc. Datorită istoriei Corului Național de Cameră identificăm o înclinație deosebită către repertoriul spaniol și, într-un sens mai larg, către tema hispanității, care reprezintă o trăsătură unică a acestui grup coral.

Cuvinte-cheie: Corul Național de Cameră, Ilona Stepan, arta corală profesionistă, Fundația Culturală Union Fenosa, Hispanitate, Javier Busto, Matías Antón Mena, A tu lado, Xavier Montsalvatge i Bassols, Canto negro.

The National Chamber Choir was created, largely, due to some essential transformations that took place in the cultural realities of the Republic of Moldova at the beginning of the 21st century. The changes that have taken place are related to the emergence of the private sector in the sphere of showbiz, the formation of patronage and sponsorship phenomena in the music art. It is known that in the Republic of Moldova the first private artistic group was the *Union Fenosa Choir*, which later passed from its original status to the current one, becoming a state-funded formation, having the status of *The National Chamber Choir* that operates within the public institution named the *Organ Hall*.

The purpose of this article is to review the first historical period of the choir, which includes its training stage, competitions, repertoire selection, recording of three CDs, etc.

The *Union Fenosa Foundation* was established on September 26, 2000 with the aim of conducting philanthropic and sponsorship activities. In a short period of time, the Foundation „has managed to make itself known in the Republic of Moldova through various activities that support and promote culture, arts, sciences and sports” [1, p. 4]. Among musical events sponsored by *The Union Fenosa Company*, we will nominate the following: in 2001 the Foundation supported the international festival *The Day of New Music*, 10th edition, *Spanish Music Recital* by soprano Anastasia Buruiană and guitarist Constantin Andrei on November 25, 2001. On June 28, 2002, a Chamber Concert by the National Chamber Orchestra, conducted by C. Sagarra (Spain) [1, p. 4] and on May 24, 2002 a *Concert for friends* with the participation of the *Gloria Choir* (conductor – Oleg Constantinov) have been organized [2, p. 4]. Of course, this list can be extended.

Only in 2002 the Foundation took a step of historical importance to the culture of our country: it goes from holding separate musical events to setting up, for the first time in Moldova, a private mixed choir (chamber choir). The *Union Fenosa Choir* was officially established on March

18, 2002, bringing together 34 young artists, students and graduates of the State University of Arts (AMTAP). The first concerts of the group that took place on July 6 and 7, 2002, aroused the enthusiasm of the public, a fact reflected in the *Nuestras Noticias Newsletter* of the foundation [3, p. 3]. The special role of the President of the *Union Fenosa Group* in Moldova, Ignacio Ibarra, in the appearance of this group deserves to be appreciated. It is his inspired idea to create, for the first time, a professional artistic collective under the umbrella of *Union Fenosa* [3, p. 3].

Here is how I. Ibarra explained his idea at the time: “I was surprised by the angelic voices of the young people in your country and it was my dream to highlight them, bringing them together in an exceptional choir, to promote art and beauty both in Moldova and anywhere in the world where *Union Fenosa Company* is present.” [3, p. 3]

It should be noted that *The Union Fenosa Company*, through its foundations, supports culture not only in the Republic of Moldova, but also in other countries of the world. For example, in Spain, the country where it was founded, the company funds the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid, but the establishment of a chamber choir remains an unprecedented initiative for *Union Fenosa*. The realization of such a project was due to the presence on the Moldovan land of some traditions of choral interpretation, which also confirms I. Ibarra: „In other European countries, „the choir” no longer holds the place of a professional genre because, the amateurs take care of him.” [4]

I. Stepan, head of the Choir Conducting department and director of the Choir at the Academy of Music Theatre and Fine Arts, was invited as conductor and artistic director. She gathered around her the best former and current students of the respective department. This was the condition of I. Ibarra: the members of the choir should be trained and formed specialists. Thus, a group of musicians have been soon organized and become the only professional chamber choir in Moldova.

The relatively short but very fruitful period of the activity within the *Union Fenosa Cultural Foundation* brought the fame of the choir in the country and abroad. The group promoted professional choral art in the Republic of Moldova, holding concerts in various localities, but also in the capital. Beginning with those times till nowadays, the team takes part in socio-cultural solemnities of national and European significance, but also of local importance. These concerts are most often performed outdoors and are meant to popularize professional art.

All the concerts of the choir during the studied period were presented in the form of charities as an investment of the company in the cultural development of the Republic of Moldova. These events took place in the conditions of crowded halls, which confirms the constant interest of the public and the high artistic level of the mentioned group.

The programs of the first concerts that took place on July 6 and 7, 2002 in the Organ Hall were composed of the most popular choral works for choir from different eras and national cultures being signed by O. Lasso, A. Scandelli, H. Wolf, P. Cesnokov, H. Texon, S. Drăgoi. Among the most remarkable concerts we also nominate the *Christmas Concert* at the M. Bieșu Opera and Ballet National Theater, on January 11, 2003, the Concert dedicated to *Women's Day*, March 7, 2003 and the vocal-symphonic concert in collaboration with the Teleradio-Moldova Symphony Orchestra (artistic director and main conductor Gheorghe Mustea), on June 6, 2003, which took place at the Organ Hall, as well as the concert at the *Inauguration of the Catholic Cathedral* in Chisinau, October 11, 2003, etc.

An important event in the evolution of the choir took place on April 25, 2003, when, on the occasion of the Holy Holiday of Easter, Ferenc Liszt's *Requiem* for men's choir was performed, for the first time in Chisinau. Performing vocal soloists were four men selected from the *Union Fenosa Choir*: Iurie Cealic, Ion Savan, Andrei Otean, Andrei Caraman, the invited instrumentalists were Dumitru Hanganu, Simion Luchian, trumpet; Alexandru Țapeș and Marcel

Suceveanu, trombone; Ion Todei, percussion and Anna Strezeva, organ.

It is well known that F. Liszt's choir music is not exactly comfortable in vocal interpretation, the composer's creation being based, in general, on a thinking focused on the principles of instrumental music. Here is what academy professor V. Boldurat said: "Liszt's *Requiem* was prepared by the men's Choir led by I. Stepan for a private project in Madrid, Spain (April 2003). For me as a professional, this premiere was «something divine», because, what other choir would have undertaken such a mission, to expose a creation so sophisticated from the technical point of view, but also with rigorous stylistic requirements. With regard to the general sound of the choir and the ensemble as a unity, what I. Stepan does for the timbre unification of choral parties and voices, in particular, can, in fact, be performed only electronically, as only in music studios can be obtained."

On June 6, 2003, the cantata *Who Shakes the Dew* (*Cine scutură roua*) for soloists, choir and orchestra by V. Zagorschi was performed, on folk lyrics processed by Grigore Vieru, with the participation of the National Symphony Orchestra of Teleradio-Moldova and the soloists Mihai Munteanu and Maria Țonin. The presentation of these two large-scale works set's an important direction in the choir's activity, related to its collaboration with various artistic groups in the country, with the aim of interpreting large-scaled vocal-symphonic opuses.

Another tradition established by *Union Fenosa Choir* was the annual organization of concerts dedicated to *Hispanic Day*, in which the creations of Spanish composers were mostly performed. These are the concerts that took place on October 12, 2002 and 2003. We will refer, in particular, to the one in 2003 in which the Spanish repertoire was completed with creations by French composers based on Spanish theme. Thus, choral miniatures signed by M. Ravel, M. de Falla, C. Saint-Saëns, J. Ma Benavente, J. Rodrigo, Ma Teresa Oller, J. Guri-di, A. Hose, E.L. Chavarri, E. Sanches Fuentes, R. Noble, F. Alonso were performed.

The acquisition of the Spanish repertoire of different epochs and genres became one of the constant elements of the evolution of CUF, a fact confirmed by the organization on June 22, 2004 of a Choral Event of Spanish and American Music with the participation of pianist Serghei Constantinov and the Guitar Ensemble of Union Fenosa Foundation.

We will briefly analyze two pieces that belong to Spanish composers from the choir repertoire. First of them named *A tu lado* by Javier Busto and Matías Antón Mena [5] was recorded during a *live* production by *The Union Fenosa Choir* during the above mentioned event in June 2004. This choral miniature capitalizes on the traditions of Spanish music, both genetically (*habanera*) and stylistically. It is well known that traditional Spanish music, in general, and the genre of *habanera*, in particular, is distinguished by advanced metrical and rhythmical thinking based on contrast, and sometimes in conflict, overlapping binary and ternary patterns. We can demonstrate this by involving the syncopated rhythmic drawings (m. 2, 4, 6 and so on) within the measure of 2/4, where the drawing of a dotted eighth with a sixteenth linked with a quarter is used. In this way, the emphasis is on the weak time, creating a typical effect for the given genre. We notice that the given procedure is used, especially at the end of musical phrases.

Another characteristic decrease typical to Spanish music is found in mm. 10, 14, 55, 59

etc.: two dotted eighths followed by two sixteenths, which „unbalance” the basic metric pulse. In fact, these models serve as the basis for the metrical and rhythmical concepts of the whole miniature. As an example serves m. 20 where this game of ternary and binary models takes place (break of sixteenth-three sixteenth and a triplet). In the last section (m. 52 and on) we notice a vertical combination of the various rhythmic patterns (two triplets in the soprano’s part in which the melodic line is exposed and the dotted rhythm sixteenth-eighth-sixteenth and a triplet, in the other parts, those ones having the accompanying role).

These rhythmic peculiarities caused by the national specificity of the musical language require from the conductor and the choristers a rhythmic precision, the mastery of combining the contrasting designs maintaining the basic metrical pulse.

As for the intonation aspect of the miniature it is noteworthy that the whole creation is based on a simple but expressive melody, which is easily memorized thanks to special procedures: repetition of musical phrases, inflection from the minor to the parallel major tonality (m. 8), the internal structure of the incipient section *aabb* and other methods.

The alternation of the sections is done with the change of the homonymous minor-major modes, a procedure also revealed in the sound colors played by the choir. The skill of properly modeling the position of the vocal sound

A tu lado by Javier Busto and Matías Antón Mena

determines the obtaining of the desired timbre colors that ensure the creation of one or another atmosphere dictated by the modal exchange between the sections.

Referring to the interpretation requirements of contemporary choral music, the contemporary Russian choir conductor and pro-

fessor B.G. Tevlin believes that the new choral works "... go ahead of the possibilities of performing art, allow to the choir conductor to look for vocal paints, sound strokes, reveal the artful interweaving of voice, understand the architectonics of episodes, hear pauses, to not be afraid of the rigidity of the chords" [6, p. 173].

A tu lado by Javier Busto and Matías Antón Mena

Based on the findings of B.G. Tevlin, we can easily appreciate the interpretive qualities of the conductor I. Stepan who has the ability to reveal the concept of any creation, managing to obtain a special chorus sound deduced from the refinement of her aesthetic sense.

Thus, listening to the interpretation of *A tu lado* we notice a certain emotional restraint, the lack of exaggerated contrasts, even in the culminating moment (m. 52) factors that determine a treatment without vulgarity. It is also worth noting an appropriate to the genre, sound emission which ensures the impeccable intonation of the group, the homogeneity of the voices and the substrates of the choral texture. These procedures create a transparent, soft choir palette with watercolor shades, and the inherent passion of the musical score is rendered inwardly. Therefore, I. Stepan's interpretation as a conductor corresponds to the composer's concept, adequately conveying the artistic message.

The second creation, entitled *Canto negro*, is signed by another Spanish composer Xavier Montsalvatge i Bassols [7] and represents a

complex choir score, which puts the performers in front of several tasks with increased difficulty. First of all, the specifics of the choral score are related to the fact that each party has its own musical material that does not coincide with the others neither in rhythmic nor intonation aspect. In the soprano's part, repeated musical phrases are used, divided into different intervals, such as perfect quartets and fifths, seconds and large sixths. We mention that the rhythmic pattern manifested in the first measures is preserved later (as a rhythmic *ostinato*), while the tone and structure of the intervals are subject to change.

Alto, initially has two monorhythmic lines divided into thirds with the involvement of long sounds (half note), and then their game involves other intervals, but also shorter durations. In the treatment of the tenor party, it is worth paying attention to two specific moments: first of all, it is built of three superimposed voices (mm. 19-30) and organized complicated from a rhythmic point of view. Secondly, tenors often imitate traditional Spanish instruments, a fact confirmed by the involvement of the onomato-

poeia: *yam-bam-bo, yam-bam-be, a-el*, likewise, by involving *ostinato* rhythmic patterns with the change of the pitch of the sounds according to the modification of the harmonic plan. If the first model, that of the tenors, is associated with the imitation of the instrumental bass or the guitar, the second one – from the bass part, models the specifics of the interpretation on differently tuned drums.

The compositional specificities depicted in the *Canto negro* score allow its evaluation as an *a cappella* creation with a high degree of interpretive difficulty, the realization of which is possible only in the case of a professional, well-trained band. According to the Russian musicologist A. Ushkariov, it is within the chamber choir that favorable conditions are created for the interpretation of highly complex choral scores, here including the contemporary repertoire, as well. [8, p. 96] Thus, the overlapping of absolutely different rhythmic designs for any choral part, the presence of a complicated

harmonic plan given in the *Animato* tempo are optimal interpretive requirements, mostly for a numerically reduced vocal-choral composition, whose sound would reflect the multitude of details that enrich the choral texture. In this sense, we also support the statement of the Romanian musicologist D. Botez with reference to the subtlety of the interpretive qualities of the chamber choir, which also has the conviction that: “diction, rhythm etc. – it is perceived immediately”, reason for which “for such a choir we need very good elements”. He also states that „the small defects in a large choir, coming from weaker elements, are often lost in the sound mass and sometimes escape even to the most experienced listener” [9, p. 20].

The complexity of musical language, unstable tonal logics (achieved by moving from the initial key *A major* through *B flat major* and *E flat major, F major* etc.), the divided process that adds density to the choral texture, the simultaneous combination of various means of musical

Canto negro by Xavier Montsalvatge i Bassols

expression and the imitation of musical instruments presents difficulties that have been successfully overcome by the *Union Fenosa Choir*, argued by the interpretation model kept on CD.

Returning to *The Union Fenosa Choir's* activities, we cannot ignore the European tours and the participation at the international tours and competitions. We will briefly list the choir performance in chronological order. On September 18 – 22, 2002, *The Union Fenosa Choir* participated in the 5th edition of the *Europe and its Songs International Choral Festival*, which took place in Barcelona, where it won three major awards: *Best Choir* in the Mixed Choir category (professional groups up till 40 persons); the title of *Best Conductor*, awarded to I. Stepan; in addition, the group won the *Grand Prize* for Best Festival Choir.

In December 2002, *The Union Fenosa Choir* together with the Madrid Philharmonic Orchestra participated in a *Christmas Concert* organized by Siemens, led by the Spanish conductor Pascual Osa. On April 15, 2003, the choir took part in a concert organized by the Madrid City Hall at the *Real Iglesia de San Gines Church*. Following a successful evolution at the 50th *International Habanera and Polyphony Festival*, Torrevieja, Spain (August, 2004).

Another prestigious competition, the *International Romantic Music Performance Competition*, held from 6 to 10 November 2003 in the Czech city of Vlahovo Brezi, brought impressive results: *Grand Prize* in the Mixed Choirs category, *Best Men's Choir Award*; and the *Best Conductor Award* accorded to I. Stepan.

On November 15, 2003, the ensemble was invited to the Choir Competition in Avilés, Asturias, and on December 30, 2003 *The Union Fenosa Choir* is taking part of the *New Year's Eve Concert* in La Coruña, together with the Galician Symphony Orchestra. International performances are complemented by the Choir's participation in the inaugural concert of the *Year of Santo Xacobeo* in the *Santa Iglesia de Santiago de Compostela Cathedral*: the event took place on January 1, 2004.

In January 2005, the *Union Fenosa Cultural Foundation* was disbanded and the Choir was left without its official status, without financial support, without a rehearsal room and, respectively, without management. At the same time, thanks to the efforts of the artistic director of the choir, I. Stepan, but also to the enthusiasm and loyalty of the members, the group continued its activity. In May 2005 at the *International Festival of Orthodox Music in Hajnowka*, Poland, the ensemble won the Second Prize in the category of professional choirs.

We draw some conclusions. The short but very fruitful period of *The Union Fenosa Choir's* activity both nationally and internationally represents a stage of becoming that led to the artistic and interpretive maturity of the choir. We will list the most important of its features:

- a distinctive interpretive style of the collective was formed;
- the choir has performed internationally, winning several prestigious awards in European choral art competitions;
- the choir contributed to the completion of the musical heritage of the Republic of Moldova by launching three CDs, two of which are made by the entire choir, including a *cappella* choral music: *Concierto Coro Union Fenosa* (2002) and the *second Choral Entertainment* (2003); and the third, performed with the participation of the men's choir group, includes *Requiem* by F. Liszt, for men's choir, soloists and organ;
- the historical-stylistic directions of the choir's repertoire were drawn: pre-classical, classical, romantic, contemporary music;
- a genuine palette of repertoire was established (from the choral miniature to the large-scaled vocal-symphonic genres like *passion, requiem, oratorio*);
- choral works signed for different interpretative components were approached: a *cappella*, with the accompaniment of organ, piano, orchestra, vocal-symphonic with the involvement of soloists;
- in terms of extending the limits of academic music, the specifics of the choir can be

explained by the interest in non-academic music, like the *folk song* (*habanera, carol, spirituals*), jazz music, *tango*, etc.;

- thanks to the history of the formation of the group, the choir has a special inclination towards the Spanish repertoire, and, in a broader sense, towards the theme of Hispanicity, which is a special feature, even unique, of this choral group.

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3. *Union Fenosa gathered the voices of angels in an exceptional choir*. In: Our News. Newsletter. Union Fenosa Group in the Republic of Moldova, July 2002, no. 7 (14), p. 3.

4. A quote from the interview conducted by the author of this article with Ms. Adriana Chiriac, former director of communication and external relations at Union Fenosa.

5. Javier Busto born 1949 in Hondarribia, Basque Country, Spain is a Spanish choral music composer and conductor. He was initiated to choir direction by Erwin List. So, in 1978 he founded the Eskifaia Choir in Hondarribia and later, in 1995, he founded the second choir – Kanta Cantemus Korua. J. Busto has pre-

sented his compositions at the Fourth World Symposium on Choral Music in Sydney, Australia in 1996, and was guest conductor of the Tokyo Cantat in 2000. His choirs have won first place awards in France, Italy, Austria, and Germany. Busto has served on the jury of composition and choral competitions in Spain, France, Italy and Japan.

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7. Matías Antón Mena born 1957 in Torreveja, Alicante, Spain, is a Spanish writer and poet. He completed his master's degree at the University of Murcia. He participates in the foundation of the Board of Habaneras and in the drafting of the bases of the internationalization of the Board. He writes several volumes of poetry, including *Girones de corazón* (Heartbreaks), *Huellas del sol* (Sunprints), *La soledad autótrofa* (Autotrophic loneliness), *El verbo que me habita* (The verb that inhabits me). Matías Antón Mena has written lyrics for habaneras nationally and internationally, as well as *A tu lado* the mandatory choral work for the 50th Jubilee edition of the *Habaneras and Poliphony Festival* in Torreveja, Spain, 2004.

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