



Caragiale's Critical Engagement with German and French Music: A Study of Musical Culture and Artistic Tension

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Abstract: In this text, the focus is on the profound and sometimes contradictory relationship that Ion Luca Caragiale, a prominent Romanian playwright, had with German musical culture. Caragiale, known for his sharp wit and critical perspectives, expressed both admiration and disapproval of various German composers, reflecting his complex relationship with their music. The translation explores his views on composers like Richard Wagner, Johannes Brahms, and Jacques Offenbach, delving into his critiques of Wagner's revolutionary approach, his deep appreciation for Brahms as a worthy successor to Beethoven, and his mixed feelings toward Offenbach's operatic works. Caragiale's reflections on German music reveal not only his personal tastes but also provide insight into the cultural and artistic climate of his time, characterized by a tension between tradition and innovation, as well as between morality and artistic freedom.

Keywords: musical tradition vs. innovation; Richard Wagner; Johannes Brahms; Jacques Offenbach; German musical culture; Beethoven's influence.

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1. Introduction

Richard Wagner is characterized by exaggeration, powerful sounds, instabilities, and the heroes in his works who are often sick, and Caragiale did not fully resonate with his music: "He could not listen to Wagner for long, always maintaining reservations. However, he was tormented by a genius he had not yet understood." The way German musical drama had evolved in the 19th century was not to Caragiale's liking. Although familiar with Wagner's creations, his critical spirit appears in a report where he refers to some traditional elements in the German composer's works, which he found outdated as a language. The moments from Wagner's operas mentioned below, though appreciated by the public, had nothing revolutionary in terms of musical language, with its innovative elements being especially evident in the stage works composed after the premiere of *Lohengrin*. From Panait Cerna, we learn:

"One object of such contradictory opinions for Caragiale was Wagner. I heard him say that music shouldn't always follow the outdated models from three hundred years ago; that if there is a railway, music should not be like a carriage; that a 'great one' like Wagner had to come along and change music 'according to the times'. But every time he heard certain parts from Wagner that seemed vulgar to him, he would get angry and call him names. He especially despised the march from *Tannhäuser* and the wedding march from *Lohengrin*. "To say it's fairground music? No way! It's got its charm. In a wine restaurant, they'd be embarrassed to play such a thing. Maybe in a poor restaurant it would fit. And this is what he said was the music of the future! How ridiculous! If it comes to that, I'd rather listen to Chopin!" For Chopin was the target of his mockery."

2. Appreciations of German Musical Culture

Richard Wagner (1813, Leipzig – 1883, Venice) was one of the most important composers of the 19th century, a playwright, and an art theorist, a prominent representative of German musical romanticism. He created operas, symphonic works, and chamber music. He was one of those who wrote his own librettos for his operas, remarkable works also included in the history of German literature., Translations in Romanian of these works were done by poet Șt. O. Iosif. Caragiale seems not to appreciate the vulgarity of his writings and the symbolist characteristics, which he did not like: "The writer's attitude toward almost the entire literature of his time dissolves into dozens of parodies in verse or prose (after Bolintineanu, Vlahuță, Delavrancea, Macedonski and the symbolists, the peasant writers, and even Eminescu). The only notable Caragiale verses are written under the regime of parody."

A composer whom Caragiale appreciates is Brahms. He unexpectedly discovers in Brahms a successor to Beethoven: "[...] the discovery that delighted him, even when he thought that the possibility of loving other composers was over for him. One day, he came back excited from a concert where he had heard a symphony by Brahms. He was happy discovering that 'The Titan' (L. v. Beethoven) has a grandson." The term "grandson" shows Caragiale's recognition of Brahms as a worthy successor to Beethoven in the world of music. His enthusiastic behavior after a concert where Brahms' Symphony No. 3 was played, humming and expressing his joy without inhibition, emphasizes the profound impact Brahms' music had on Caragiale: "Towards the end of his life, Caragiale had developed a love for Brahms. He called him a 'little Beethoven'. After coming out of the Gewandhaus, where Symphony No. 3 had been played, Caragiale greeted us humming loudly and without caring about the world (this was his habit) the third part (Poco allegretto). 'What beauty!' he exclaimed happily. 'This is a song of Sicilian fishermen.' He manifested the same enthusiasm as when he listened to Beethoven's symphonies, vocalizing some fragments from them."

Ion Luca Caragiale clearly perceives a sonic similarity between Johannes Brahms and Ludwig van Beethoven. His appreciation for Brahms could reflect his recognition of the deep influence Beethoven had on European classical and romantic music. Brahms himself was aware of Beethoven's legacy and was often compared to him in the context of his symphonic and chamber works. The fact that Caragiale identifies this lineage suggests not only an appreciation for the continuity of the German musical tradition but also for how Brahms reinterprets and innovates within this tradition. In the cultural context of the time, this perception reflects an appreciation for the depth and complexity Brahms brought to music in a way that preserves and reinvents the Beethovenian spirit: "Johannes Brahms paid his first visit to the Gieseemanns, but his interest in music and love for Beethoven's art were as strong as ever," which demonstrates the link between the two. Brahms, due to his "anxiety of influence," felt enormous pressure from his contemporaries and critics to continue the symphonic tradition established by Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven was considered a titan of the symphony, and Brahms felt he had to compose something truly remarkable to meet those high standards. That is why he delayed publishing his first symphony for 20 years. Brahms was not willing to compromise his high standards and worked intensively to develop his style and perfect his compositional techniques until he felt ready to leave his mark on a major symphonic work.

In the history of music, Johannes Brahms (1833, Hamburg – 1897, Vienna) is one of the key figures of the second half of the 19th century, with his creations falling within the romantic movement. Through his four symphonies, he is

considered the continuer of Beethoven's symphonic legacy, but he is also remembered for his chamber music, lieder, and orchestral concertos. Symphony No. 3 was first performed in Vienna in 1883 and consists of four movements: I – Allegro con brio, II – Andante, III – Poco allegretto, IV – Allegro – un poco sostenuto. Caragiale's comparison between a Sicilian fishermen's song and the striking theme in the third part of this symphony is surprising. The consulted materials do not indicate that Brahms drew inspiration from Italian folk music when composing this work. *Poco allegretto*, the part Caragiale hums, is a remarkable moment of lyricism and strong expressiveness that leads to a state of meditation and introspection. It contrasts with the energetic atmosphere of the piece: *Allegro con brio* introduces the audience to a bold, dramatic state with powerful sounds, *Andante* is clear, tender, with a calm, introspective, pastoral quality, and the final *Allegro–un poco sostenuto* is fast and full of tension. The dynamics and balance of the symphony reveal the idea that the dramatist is drawn to contrasts, to tones that surprise.

Other references to German music appear in a letter dated July 25, 1910:

Your letter gave me particular pleasure, showing that you were interested in the book of Teutonic marches. The march I mentioned to you the other day (Fahrberliner) is not in this book; but on page 12, I believe, you'll find Herzog Braunschweig's march, which, as you well remember, we heard in Hildesheim, and we liked it very much then.

From the above passage, it is clear that Ion Luca Caragiale appreciated not only the symphonic or operatic genres of German music but also other musical forms, such as marches. He valued the "Teutonic" music he listened to in Germany, recognizing its diversity and quality in various musical contexts. However, his opinion about stage music was different, as seen in *A Stormy Night*. In the dialogue between the characters Jupân Dumitrache and Ipingescu in Act I, Caragiale provides a critical perspective on stage music, suggesting a more reserved or even ironic attitude toward it. This may reflect a satirical approach to certain artistic conventions or practices in the theater of the time, highlighting his critical and observational side toward contemporary art and culture: "What are we even doing with those German comedies, just fads; we pay for tickets and don't understand anything...".

From a letter dated June 25, 1906: "After I throw this letter in the box to avoid missing the post, I will hear *Orphée aux Enfers* by Offenbach – great fun, sir." The assessment of Offenbach as "great fun" points to the light and enjoyable atmosphere he felt.

Jacques Offenbach (1819, Deutz – 1880, Paris), a musician from the romantic period, was a German-born Jewish composer who spent much of his life in Paris. He is considered one of the most important creators of operettas (but he also wrote operas). Of the more than 100 works he composed in this genre, Caragiale here

mentions *Orphée aux Enfers*, composed in two acts and four scenes, which premiered in 1858 at the Les Bouffes-Parisiens theater in Paris. Because Offenbach composed the music for the operetta in a lively and melodic style characteristic of his operettas, his melodies have a distinct charm and are often full of humor and energy, reflecting the light and amusing atmosphere typical of the operetta genre. Also regarding his works, in a postcard from May 21, 1906, Caragiale seems interested in and appreciates the comic opera.

In the postcard dated June 25, 1906, his evaluation of some of Offenbach's works, however, differs from his earlier appreciation. In a letter dated March 31, 1912, referring to a possible viewing of one of the composer's works, the Romanian dramatist wrote: "I won't go to see Offenbach because he is immoral."

The complex relationship between morality and the artistic world in France in the second half of the 19th century significantly influenced Ion Luca Caragiale's opinions about the works of some composers from that country, affecting him unfavorably. During that period, French society was undergoing a period of transition and cultural revolution, where social and moral norms were often contested or reinterpreted in artistic works. Artists explored themes considered taboo or provocative for the time, which sometimes provoked rejection or moral criticism from more conservative contemporaries like Caragiale. With a traditional perspective on morality and art, he may have seen certain works of French composers as contrary to his personal values or as expressing excessive artistic freedom. Furthermore, in a society where movements for the emancipation of women and openness to new forms of artistic expression were emerging, Caragiale may have viewed these trends as moral decay or cultural decline. Thus, his perception of French music and art during that period could have been influenced by his personal beliefs about the relationship between art and morality in society.

3. Caragiale on French and Italian Music

Caragiale was known for his clear musical tastes and for appreciating compositions that reflected optimism and joy, rather than the melancholy often associated with minor keys. His personal preferences may have influenced his perception of Chopin's works. "However, he never reconciled with the minor tone of the melancholic Chopin and also with the continuous sadness of César Franck, saying that it made him feel like fainting or wailing."

In the account by Panait Cerna, mentioned earlier ("For Chopin was the punching bag of his mockeries"), we can add that of Cella Delavrancea: "He had no sympathy for Chopin. He laughed disdainfully, drawing heavily on his cigarette. 'They found George Sand, Musset, and Chopin, to have them with the lemon in their mouths when they felt nauseous.' The French composer César Franck annoyed him

and mocked his melancholic themes: It's like a beggar on the street corner, stretching his minor third to make us feel sorry for him."

In these statements, I.L. Caragiale also referred to the love affair between F. Chopin and the writer George Sand (born Amandine Lucille Aurore Dupin de Francueil, Baroness Dudevant, 1804, Paris – died 1876, Nohant), who had previously had another love relationship with the writer Alfred de Musset (1810, Paris – 1857, Paris).

The vast musical culture that I.L. Caragiale had allowed him to strongly advocate for and reject works by creators from the Italian peninsula, whose compositions belong to different historical periods. But, as with German musical compositions, I.L. Caragiale's opinions about Italian ones are contradictory.

While Nicolae Filimon, our first music critic, would write several music critiques about Donizetti, Caragiale would later speak critically of the Italian composer, especially of his music that entered the permanent repertoire of street organs: "Caragiale did not show any indulgence towards Donizetti's music, especially the music that became part of the permanent repertoire of barrel organs."

Horia Petra Petrescu, in his account of his meeting with Ion Luca Caragiale, describing the house in Berlin, notes that his room was full of cultural objects: "photographs, small and large... artist Brezeanu... Original landscapes by Grigorescu... caricatures by Gavarni and Daumier." In a conversation about the comedy *Tirică, Sotirescu et al.*, Caragiale uses musical terms to describe the play, demonstrating the playwright's ability to create a scenario using musical tempo terms:

"At the beginning often hangs the fate of a theatrical piece. As the beginning is, andante or con brio – so is the audience predisposed to the scenes that follow." The discussion is accompanied by music played on the piano by D. G. Dimitriu, and Caragiale shows the bust of the Titan from Bonn: "'Do you know who my idol is?' Mr. C. turns to me. 'Look,' and he shows me the photographs on the walls of the music room. 'Beethoven?' 'Him!' And wherever I turn in the room, I only see his photographs.'"

Verdi is also among Caragiale's favorites: "He appreciated Italian opera – he had Verdi's bust in his music room." The presence of the busts of Verdi and Beethoven in his house can also be interpreted as an expression of the interconnectedness between the appreciated forms of art and their impact. He is often caught in moments where he sings, hums musical pieces, and feels the works: "One day, before breakfast, I found him standing, singing *Caro nome* from *Rigoletto* [...], and after a pause, as a comment on the melody *Caro nome*, 'What sweetness of feeling! – 'What a shiver of emotion!' added Caragiale."

In a letter sent to Paul Zarifopol in April 1909, we learn about the sketches Caragiale outlined in composing a musical piece: "You must compose the adjacent *Duettino veneziano*, which will surely seem something new to you. I would like a light genre of music, a guitar. Of course, I do not meddle to give you advice in your specialty, but since I have been to sweet Venice three times, and I have sailed in a gondola, I take the liberty of reminding you of a particularity of the lagoon's canzonette; the chorus is generally in waltz tempo, while the verses are 2/4 allegro – 'oh, Madonna!'"

It is noteworthy that I. L. Caragiale knew musical terminology, as evidenced by his interest in the classical rondo form in music, which involves the alternation between the chorus and verses. He wanted this structure to be used in the specific context of Venetian traditional music, often associated with the guitar, to highlight the particularity of that musical tradition. Such works were often composed and performed during the famous Venice Carnival, a festive period marked by the use of masks and various cultural activities.

In a letter to Zarifopol dated December 10, 1906, Caragiale also mentions the poem *Dogaresa și poetul*, expressing his desire for this text to be set to music. This practice illustrates the frequent collaboration between poets and composers in his time, where music and literature intertwined to create complex and multidimensional artistic works. Thus, his involvement in the musical domain was not limited to passive appreciation but reflected a deep understanding of musical forms and contexts, highlighting his desire to integrate specific elements into the literary creations of his time.

4. Conclusion

I.L. Caragiale's relationship with music reflects both his deep appreciation for specific genres and his critical engagement with various musical traditions. His preferences leaned toward compositions that embodied optimism and joy, and he was particularly critical of works that exuded melancholy, such as those by Chopin and César Franck. Despite his criticism, Caragiale's knowledge of music was profound, and he was well-versed in its terminology and structures, often using musical metaphors to describe theatrical works and creatively integrating musical elements into his literary endeavors.

His admiration for certain composers, like Verdi and Beethoven, alongside his critiques of others, such as Donizetti, showcases his nuanced approach to music. Caragiale's musical tastes and understanding went beyond passive enjoyment, influencing his writing and reflecting his broader cultural sophistication. Through his letters and discussions, we see how music and literature intertwined in his life, demonstrating his belief in the power of art to shape and reflect human emotions and

experiences. Ultimately, Caragiale's legacy as both a playwright and a music enthusiast reveals a man who valued the transformative potential of artistic expression in all its forms.

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