

SERGIU CELIBIDACHE SEEN BY THE WRITER PETRU COMARNESCU

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Abstract

Sergiu Celibidache certainly remains one of the great universal artistic personalities of the twentieth century. He was the youngest conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic. He was a conductor endowed with a superior ability to understand musical phenomenology, with a brilliant memory. At the same time, he was considered by some contemporaries to be extremely demanding, with a certain inclination to become virtuous, his musical conception being maybe too exclusive. If Celibidache was impetuous in the inside, in his dealings with his friends he was a man of rare generosity, sensitivity and passions.

Keyword: *philharmonic, Celibidache, conductor, artist.*

1. SHORT BIOGRAPHY

On 15th of August 1996, a day after Sergiu Celibidache's death, "The New York Times" American publication described him in a dedicated obituary notice, as being "one of the greatest enigmas of the 20th century" (MOCEANU, 2019). Sergiu Celibidache (his name was initially spelt *Celebidachi*) was born in Romania, Roman town, on 28th of June 1912, in an intellectual family. Six months after Sergiu's birth, the family moved to Iași, one of the important cultural cities of Romania. His father of Greek origin, named Demostene, had been an officer in the Romanian army, having afterwards some administrative functions as that of prefect or assistant mayor in Iași. According to his account, his father played the piano very well, "all Chopin's waltzes, by ear, but not in a correct tonality." His mother named Maria, born Brăteanu, was a teacher of chemistry, but "absolutely unmusical."

At the age of 4, Sergiu Celibidache started playing the piano and later took some music lessons. With an excellent education level, his father had great plans for his son's career. "My luck... I may never be able to thank my father enough for letting me do what I wanted. I was a very good

student at school, (he was very ambitious, he had been an officer and then he entered politics) as I was good at school, my father hurt me to make a high political career, to become maybe president of the republic (he laughs), because I could hear them secretly talking to my mother. That's why he gave me a special education. I had private teachers of French, ballet etc."



Fig. 1. Sergiu Celibidache (COMARNESCU, 2003)

He graduated from the Pedagogical Institution of Iași and, according to some sources, he began to study mathematics and philosophy at the University of Iași but also music at the Academy of Music of Iași, with Antonin Ciolan as his teacher (LANG, 2015). Entering the "conflict" of views on his future career, his father not taking his artistic vocation seriously, considering it a waste of time, something frivolous that will not make him professionally but on the contrary, will miss him. At the request of his parents, he applied somewhere in 1932 at the Polytechnic Institute of Bucharest. Here he successfully followed for a year the courses after which he abandoned them, to the despair of his father

(CELIBIDACHE, 2008). This made his father so upset that he kicked him out of the house. In a dialogue filmed from 1994, Celibidache recalls that moment: "After two years of Polytechnic, I returned to Iași and told my father that I didn't like what I was doing at all... What? he asked me, I replied that I was not interested. Aren't you interested? Then go out! He had the strength of character not to change his mind and I the strength of character, never to return. Although I had bought a tie for which I had raised money for 6 months, bought in Lăpușneanu Street from the Cristian store, I asked him if I could take my tie with me, He answered me firmly, No! And I left without one money in my pocket back to Bucharest" (CELIBIDACHE, 1994). Sergiu followed his vocation showing stoicism, made obvious compromises, accepted life in shortcomings imposed by the circumstances. With a beautiful appearance, with a tall and imposing stature, with black and wavy hair, Celibidache spoke a conquering Moldavian dialect. In Bucharest, he earns his living at the beginning through small "tips", such as the occasional pianist at various events, schools or parties. He works at the dance school of the talented choreographer Iris Barbura, who later becomes his life partner. Celibidache also works as a volleyball coach: "Nobody wondered what Sergiu lived on in Bucharest. Everyone knew how stubborn he was and everyone knew he had nothing to eat. But he lived, he preferred to play jazz in clubs or dance to earn money, but he would not give up his ideas. This is how the "Celibidache phenomenon" came to life," recalls his good friend Eugen Trancu-Iași (CELIBIDACHE, 2008).

In the autumn of 1938, Celibidache left Bucharest to be admitted to the Berlin Conservatoire "Hochschule für Musik," where he succeeded. From here with true selflessness, he would be said to be subject to the severe disciplines of one of the most serious academic schools in the world (CELIBIDACHE, 2008).

His consistency and seriousness have made him known to the Berlin circles since his last years of college. In 1943 the well-known pianist Conrad Hansen told a Romanian friend of his: "Here you have a compatriot in the last year at the "Hochschule für Musik," Sergiu Celibidache, a true

German. He conducted a concert in school all the musicians in Berlin speak about, it is sure he will make a brilliant conducting career (CELIBIDACHE, 2008)." In 1945 Celibidache graduated from the Academy "Hochschule für Musik" and became a doctor in mathematics and philosophy. His fate smiled on him, and due to the removal of the Philharmonic conductor, *Wilhelm Furtwängler*, for collaborating with the Nazi regime, Celibidache became the *pro tempore* conductor of the famous Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra until 1952, when Furtwängler, rehabilitated, became conductor again. During this time, Celibidache conducts over 400 concerts with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, establishing himself as a musical personality of exceptional artistic exigency. He was reproached for showing an exaggerated exigency towards the orchestra, extremely meticulous and perfectionist during rehearsals, a follower of a large number of rehearsals before concerts, especially for which he considering qualitative orchestras, methods that did not make him be loved by a side of the instrumentalists. From this moment Celibidache lives a disappointment by its removal, and will be found for a short time without having a permanent function. The rest of his life he travelled the world with his wand, being regularly invited to the desk of famous symphony orchestras in South America and Europe, such as: the Radio Orchestra of Stuttgart (Germany), the National Orchestra of Paris (France), the Radio Symphony Orchestra of Stockholm (Sweden) etc. From 1979 until his death, Sergiu Celibidache held the position of music director of the city of Munich and thus became one of the greatest conductors of the twentieth century.

The portrait made by Petru Comarnescu

During 1966, Petru Comarnescu is in Italy, having the quality of curator of the Romanian Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Here he represents Romania with a retrospective exhibition of the painter *Ion Țuculescu*. Comarnescu takes advantage of this visit from Italy and travels at the invitation of former generation friends or admirers, in Switzerland and France, meeting among others Ionel Jianu, Emil Cioran, Eugen Ionescu. Energetic thread, endowed by nature with a feverish

temperamental being of a wide generosity, he makes new relations in the cultural world with the thought of spreading Romanian art and culture in as many corners of the meridians as possible. Through his attention devoted to the ancient wording *"nothing human is foreign to me,"* Comarnescu notes in his extensive diary, all travel impressions, portraits, events in personal life or friends, confessions and all this makes up a material that will be published posthumously under the title *"Faces and Views of Europe."* In this published diary we find among many other information and artistic images if not the only one, the one of the largest portraits made up of Sergiu Celibidache's personality made by Petru Comarnescu. The human types described by Comarnescu are successful literary sketches, well outlined, like as Mihail Sebastian said: *"Comarnescu proves to be an exercised draftsman of figures"* (CRISTEA, 2003). We will reproduce in the following in the most authentic way possible, restricted, without intervening, a part of this artistic, intellectual and sociological portrait.



Fig. 2. Petru Comarnescu (WEBPR, 2012)

Friday, November 11, 1966, Venice. The last meetings with those of the biennials, and at 3 pm I witnessed the loading of the crates in the wagon that was to be attached to the passenger train. The rest of the diary revolves around meetings with Sergiu Celibidache and his wife. So, on Wednesday 9th, more, on Thursday 10th less and on Friday 11th November most of the day and evening until 2pm in the night, I saw Sergiu Celibidache and his wife, Ioana, born Procop Dumitrescu (COMARNESCU, 1980).

Twenty years have passed and more. When I read in the Venetian newspaper that on Wednesday, November 9, he is giving a symphonic concert at the *Teatro La Fenice*. I confess that I did not expect him to be so friendly and indebted. I told myself that I would be content to see him for a quarter of an hour, to give him a sign of life and to find out something about him. He was on his break at about 12 o'clock on Wednesday, November 9. He received me affectionately, kissing me. He told me: *"You lost a lot of weight, and I gained weight."* And as if I had resumed an interrupted conversation the day before, and not for thirty or twenty-eight years (for I have not seen him since 1938). Actually, I don't remember, but he reminded me that we saw each other again, when he came around the country (around or during the war) and when I told him things he didn't know. He never forgot, but he didn't want to tell me what. There were probably maximum appreciations, predictions about his career, although I thought he would become a great composer and not a conductor. This is how it began to manifest itself in the country (COMARNESCU, 1980).



Fig. 3. Iris Barbura (UNIVERSENCICLOPEDIA, n.d.)

I have an old friendship with Sergiu Celibidache, continued until about 1946, when I received from him the last signs of life and success. I haven't communicated since then and now, after 20 years, I have resumed my friendship as if such a long break had not occurred, each living in a different world. He treated me affectionately and in a great way, in line with his

present, when some consider him the most valuable conductor in the world, as well as the affinities of the past (COMARNESCU, 1980).

Around 1934 - 1935 I met a young man who came from Roman to Iași, rather a distinguished bohemian, whom I no longer remember who introduced him to me on *Calea Victoriei* street, where I drove on the way to the newspapers I worked for and where he walked quite often. Soon, at *Café de Paix*, I also met his then girlfriend, the highly intellectual dancer, *Iris Barbura*, from Banat region. Iris was a tall, beautiful girl, perhaps too tall for the stage. She gave more demanding choreography recitals and more special foreign and Romanian music (COMARNESCU, 1980).

I don't know what studies he had done in Iași, maybe he had studied for a year or two. I know it was imposed on me, it grew in my eyes, when he showed me a letter from the famous American pianist and composer *Duke Ellington*, then the greatest celebrity of jazz music, with *Louis Armstrong*. And until this letter I had appreciated Celibidache for his knowledge of jazz (COMARNESCU, 1980).

We didn't see each other often and I don't know if he visited me at home. We saw each other in the street or at the cafe, sometimes we went for a walk to talk. I remember a walk along the road, where in the first round of *Kiseleff* road, he told me about his intentions to become a more complex composer, not wanting to limit himself to jazz. Places are connected to more vivid ideas or feelings and your memory gives back not only what you heard, but also the place or atmosphere where you heard them. Of course, if it's something special, something that impressed you more deeply. And really, like that spring when I was walking on the road, what I said hit me in the first round, that's how I came to a synthesis between jazz and Johann Sebastian Bach! (COMARNESCU, 1980).

At that time, I was planning him a career as composer, not as a conductor, and he himself was thinking about composition and not about conducting. I don't think I helped him financially, like the others, maybe as long as I never let him pay for the drinks for him and Iris. So, I did not help him to hope later for any gratitude, and yet this man was generous with me in Venice, as

there were no others richer than himself and who were indebted to me for the first money earned in journalism (COMARNESCU, 1980).

He confessed to me that in those years I was his moral support, that he felt that I trusted his future as a musician, which few had then, and his father did not help him precisely because he loved music and he thought he would do nothing. His father, an officer, did his best to keep him away from the music and the artistic atmosphere in which he lived in Bucharest. He probably wanted him as a clerk, a teacher, not just an artist (COMARNESCU, 1980).

In 1934 - 1935, Celibidache looked like it has mixed origin, with beautiful and distinguished traits. I remember him in his overcoat or camel coat, with his long head and adorned with wavy hair. Now he has nothing to do with these traits, he has gained weight (85 kg.), But at his stature he does not look fat but rather full. His hair is still rich, still wavy, but now grey. He has become spiritualized and has the face of a holy man, a spiritualized Indian. His stature is slim even now, and when he conducting, he has very graceful movements (COMARNESCU, 1980).

I only have in mind about 4-5 meetings with him, although we saw each other more, but not often. In Venice, he reminded me of other meetings, of other exchanges of ideas and opinions, which I had forgotten. In 1938 she left the country to study abroad, together with *Iris Barbura*, because she received a scholarship from a generous man, who also helped other musicians and artists. Being a large scholarship, they both lived in Germany, and in addition Iris, after her studies, also gave recitals (COMARNESCU, 1980).

Celibidache told me that he knew not to fall victim to success. He was inclined to be extremely virtuous and did not want this. He talked to me about records, maybe to my question, why it's so against plate printing. He told me that the turntable falsifies the interpretations, does not offer the sound space that the concert hall has, that some sound effects are not even recorded. Celibidache made so many observations, appreciations, controversies, developed so many ideas and value judgments as spontaneous discussions between us, that in the 30 pages with the notes of the meeting there is a material for a book about him, as a thinker, a man of conception,

critic, aesthetician, philosopher, as well as a brilliant performer of symphonic music masterpieces (COMARNESCU, 1980).

Celibidache is a very demanding man, but maybe even too presumptuous and arrogant. If he does not cultivate false modesty, but has the courage to be critical, and especially admiring of himself, this is only the condition of that fierce self-realization, which requires self-confidence and self-awareness. He has this consciousness and self-confidence, but based on objective achievements, on a rigorous formation, helped by a philosophical thinking, in addition to his talent or genius. That some appreciations can be too demanding and exclusive, that he does not lack a dose of subjectivism, few escape this. But only by seeing life and art from the top can you lift them to the top, and he does that, with all the dangers and risks (COMARNESCU, 1980).



Fig. 4. Sergiu Celibidache (DEEZER, n.d.)

I was sometimes inclined, while he spoke to me, to believe him too categorically, by an exclusive exigency, but I thought of the fact that he could and had something to compare with, when he criticized the famous conductors of the world, he did not speak like a scoundrel who did nothing. Then his most favourable argument, the decisive argument, is that all the criticisms he brings to contemporary conductors, orchestras and the way the public is received in different countries are based on objective considerations, not subjective ones. Celibidache reproaches the conductors for not respecting the lyrics and the spirit of the scores, so he invokes the most objective realities and criteria. Here is his

strength, the strength of his intelligence and thinking, here he becomes unbeatable and in the face of this objective attitude, in the face of the fact that he starts from the author and returns to the author, wanting to do justice to the author (composer), he must we leave the inclinations to consider him arbitrary, subjective, narcissistic, in his great exigencies, in the uniqueness that he attributes to himself and that some critics confirm to him, treating him as a wizard of sounds (COMARNESCU, 1980).

What does he think about Romanians? Romanians have talent, they have, as I have noticed since I studied among foreigners, a great intelligence. We are among the smartest peoples, but we do too little with our intelligence and qualities. Thinking about his phenomenological conception, he said: "*Romanians are the smartest, but they don't know phenomenology.*" Not only they lack phenomenology, but dosed effort, discipline, rigor. We rely too much, like Italians, on spontaneity, on the mood of temperament. As he believes in the talent of Romanians, and his goal is to leave in the world a generation of valuable conductors, he would like to do it in our country, as well as to conduct with well-selected instrumentalists (COMARNESCU, 1980).

Celibidache also likes to look pleasing aesthetically, which is important for a conductor. Sometimes I caught him looking in the mirror, in the cabin at *La Fenice*, while he was talking to me, and at rehearsals he arranged his rich hair, pressing it with both hands, facing the nape of the neck. He still has a distinguished, pleasant appearance, lively, graceful movements, a slender outfit (COMARNESCU, 1980).

Perhaps Celibidache's brilliance and his splendid conduct are also due to the practice of Yoga. It feels like you are dealing with a spiritualized, deeply internalized man, meditating with enthusiasm and concentration. He expresses easily, clearly, precisely, often poetically. He has something of a magician. He does not believe in the immortality of the soul, he is not a metaphysician, but with what serenity and inner peace he behaves in front of the orchestra, so full of nerve and energy. Spiritualized energy, great and balanced

temperament, asserted intelligence and yet having, although it seems paradoxical, according to what is shown here, that Indian and Christian humility (COMARNESCU, 1980).

And walking along the streets of Venice, in the grandiose Venice, where he is so admired as in other cities of Italy or in other countries, he said to me with a satisfaction of a Romanian: "we two, from Iași, here we are!" (COMARNESCU, 1980) Petru Comarnescu.

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