

# Evocation as Creative Attitude. Romanian Composer Vasile Herman

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**ABSTRACT** – The twentieth century school of composition in Cluj-Napoca is known for its modern moderated attitude, among its representants being the figure of Vasile Herman, composer and musicologist. His long-life activity may be placed under the sign of evocation, which defines the language, the choice of stylistic features and his whole perspective as a musician. This paper brings arguments regarding the sense of evocation as an important inner resource leading to the recall of memories, the use of history as inspiration and the commitment of imagination to re-create the musical fragrance of an ancestral world.

**Keywords:** Vasile Herman, evocation, memories, history, imagination.

## 1. Introduction

As an extension of my interest for the Cluj-Napoca school of composition and musicology led by Sigismund Toduță, I submit some reflections on the creative conception of Vasile Herman.<sup>1</sup> Disciple of Sigismund Toduță, teacher of forms at the “Gheorghe Dima” Academy of Music, Herman (1929-2010) was a composer and musicologist whose preoccupations were completing each other: sometimes the compositions led to theoretical conclusions, other times the musicological studies were followed by connected compositions. This dualism in Herman’s musical activity is one of the main characteristics of his style. He was a prolific musician, with more than 120 works in most of the musical genres, including five symphonies, one opera, many cantatas, works for different instrumental and chamber ensembles, choruses. His activity as a teacher resulted in some lecture collections where the study of forms is organized according to stylistic

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epochs. Besides, due to a custom to hold scientific sessions where the teachers had to present the results of their research, there were several research papers stocked in the library of “Gheorghe Dima” Academy of Music. The name of Vasile Herman has appeared frequently in these collections, for more than 40 years. As a comparison, his fellows, also composers or teachers at the same Conservatory, left just a few studies over their career. An interesting fact, the number of studies written by Herman was surpassed only by those of Romeo Ghircoiașiu, teacher of music history. It is relevant to observe that, though he claimed the research was just a duty, the number and consistency of his papers reveal a serious analytical musicologist. No wonder that the understanding of his artistic conception is enlightened by the multitude of studies written during his lifetime activity. As a rule, the courses of forms are presenting analytical aspects of the European music tradition, while most of the other musicological studies are concerned with different issues of Romanian music.

The systematic reference to values of the European art music and Romanian folkloric tradition is a coherent attitude for the composition school founded by Sigismund Toduță, yet with personal perspectives coming from each of his disciples. Working with Toduță meant (among others), stylistic exercises for acquiring compositional skills from each epoch in the history of music. This practice favoured a connection with the European tradition, which influenced the path of his students. Most of them followed the moderated modernism in composition, complementary to the more radical modernism of the Bucharest school. Maybe an exception should be noted: the personality of Cornel Țăranu made him a more radical and avant-garde composer than his fellows, though he kept a discreet liaison with the Transylvanian spirit.

As each of Toduță’s disciples experienced and chose their way, Vasile Herman mixed the admiration for the past with his taste for research, spending more than ten years in a substantial effort to analyse the Romanian folklore, to clarify and decide upon his own instrumentarium for composition. He always thought that it was important to search deeper than just quoting melodies, rhythms or borrowing specific gestures. He used all these possibilities, but the serious theoretical studies (musical archaeology – as he called them) led him to the conclusion that there were some essentialized formulas belonging to the ancient layer of folklore which could be used in composition and treated as “micro-series”. These formulas are the object of continuous variation through transposition, interpolation, retrogradation and so on, bringing a contemporary scent, yet with an ancestral sound and autochthonous Romanian ethos.

## 2. The Sense of Evocation

Already familiar with Vasile Herman's attitude concerning the process of composition and the connection between analysis and inspiration<sup>2</sup> (since this was my research interest for a few years), I tried to find other coherent features which define his style. The modern way of handling the essentialized folkloric formulas and rhythms seems not enough to build the general atmosphere of his music. Some writings together with the observation of the tendencies in his compositions, lead to the conclusion that the scientific expertise was completed by a sense of evocation which became a stylistic feature. One of Herman's compositions is even called *The Memory of Time. Symphonic Evocation* (1985), with a declared programmatic content, but this is just an example among other works which are representational at least to some degree, though in a less explicit way. I will focus on some openings that the idea of evocation brings, using general meanings that might result in a better understanding of Herman's general conception.

### 2.1. Memories

*The Oxford Learner's Dictionary* provides one explanation for evocation as "the act of bringing a feeling, a memory or an image into your mind"<sup>3</sup>. In Vasile Herman's case, it is possible to consider the childhood memories of everyday sounds from a Transylvanian village where the composer used to spend his holidays. There are not many references to memories in his written texts; in fact, only a few interviews are mentioning them, and some of the studies make slight suggestions, but the way he handles the musical material is more than convincing about their importance in the configuration of his style.

Analysing the theory of evocation in his *Aesthetics of music*, Roger Scruton, besides bringing some critics, mentions the importance of recognition and association.<sup>4</sup> In this context, the evocation means for Herman imitating sounds, or recalling a world, specifically the rural atmosphere with which he was familiar. The reference to his youth is evident in works such as *Cela cu horile* [The one with the songs], composed in his early years, a musical self-portrait, since he had been known among peasants as "nepotul popii Pintii, cela cu horile" ["grandson of Priest Pinteia, the one with the songs – an approximate translation"].

The evocation of a place is a way of recalling memories. Eero Tarasti states in his *Existential Semiotics*: "in music, the poetics of place can appear in the sonorous iconic

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<sup>2</sup> Boancă, *Personalități ale artei muzicale: Vasile Herman*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*.

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/evocation?q=evocation>.

<sup>4</sup> Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, 145-146.

portrayal of a locale. The most primitive case is the musical landscape, in which music directly refers to the spirit of a place and evokes that spirit faithfully by means of musical imitation”<sup>5</sup>.

There are many pages in the compositions of Vasile Herman where the tendency is not to depict the geography of a place, or a landscape, but the ethos, re-creating the environment retained by his memory. The composer confessed that the village where he had spent his holidays, Mocira, close to Baia Mare, in the north of Transylvania, represented for him almost a cosmic space.<sup>6</sup>

The procedure of portraying this ambience involves creativity and does not mean lack of modern perspective. Herman was aware of the new ways in composition, he tested some and employed them selectively (such as the indeterminacy in *Grafica musicale* for one or two pianos – 1969 – or in *Viersuri de dor* [Verses of longing] – 1970; the twelve-tone and serial techniques in *Patru cântece pe versuri de George Bacovia și Mihai Beniuc* [Four songs on verses by George Bacovia and Mihai Beniuc] – 1964). Apart from the presence of specific folkloric micro-series, rhythms, and the frequent usage of *rubato*, there is an increasing role assigned to the percussion section, especially by instruments that suggest recognizable sounds and noises in a rural ambient. The works starting with the '60s show a clear preference for this group. The aforementioned *Symphonic Evocation*, composed for a large classical orchestra (about 70-75 performers), engages three groups of percussion instruments, including the semantron or bell board, woodblocks, campanelli (glockenspiel), cowbells, raganella (cog rattle) and other types of bells. The presence of percussion's varied timbres can be seen as a modern attitude, indeed specific to the music of the twentieth century. But in Herman's case, it is more than that. I consider it part of the sense of evocation, influenced by the memories that he kept. In this respect, he was in the position of not just an observer of the folkloric phenomenon, but an insider, too. And this group of instruments helped him imitate the familiar sounds, re-creating the spirit of the Romanian village. The meaning of music depends on familiarity, association, and as Burkholder states, on the knowledge of the listener. We tend to associate the familiar elements that we recognize in music with aspects of the context or the occasion in which we heard them.<sup>7</sup> Vasile Herman's intention was to offer recognizable sounds and noises in a reinterpreted perspective, capturing the past through music and placing it in a new context, based exactly on familiarity with elements in his music and on the association with the Romanian rural atmosphere. I return to one of Herman's confessions concerning the connection between his memories and the role of percussion in his works:

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<sup>5</sup> Tarasti, *Existential Semiotics*, 165.

<sup>6</sup> Constantinescu, “De la țimbala la pianul de concert”.

<sup>7</sup> Burkholder, “A Simple Model for Associative Musical Meaning”, 78.

Sometimes, in the evening, I used to sit on the edge of hill, and down, in the valley, through the tall grass could be heard glimpses of song from people who were still at work, bird trills, cowbells, and at the same time, like an echo, the hammering of the scythe on a metal wedge, a remarkable and picturesque sounding background. If I add to all these the knell of the church bells calling for compline, I could say that I was the witness of a real twilight symphony. Other times there were funeral, wedding or other ritual songs echoing over the village, the church service, the orthros, the paraclis – sounds that were melted in the crucible of my soul. Later, sublimated in my mature compositions, they were transformed into chamber-symphonic works, where the percussion brings a rustling which offers symphonic valences to the chamber music. The village's noises, recorded in my subconscious, have determined me to use a lot in composition, after the '60s, the timpani, the drums, the bells, and other instruments which were evoking the ambience where I was formed.<sup>8</sup>

The aim to evoke a familiar place is explicitly mentioned here. The emancipation of percussion instruments in Herman's works can be observed in compositions as *Panrhythmikon for five percussion groups* (1982), *Concerto for strings and percussion instruments* (1986), *Songs in Wood* (1996), or his symphony for percussion instruments called *Hestia* (2002).

## **2.2. History**

Another level of evocation can be found in the works that are related to history. Some of them bring to attention events or evoke personalities; others are based on documents or texts belonging to historical figures. The composer had a real attachment to Romanian history, and this attitude offered him not just a possibility of evoking great characters, but an escape in the communist context. We are already familiar with the requests of the political regime for aligning the works of art to the ideology, in fact for using the culture as a medium to disseminate their political ideas. The Romanian culture and music were under pressure and the composers had to pay their tribute by writing music for the party, in a similar way that this had happened to Russian composers. The enactment of the Soviet resolution from 1948 against the so-called formalist, decadent Western music, with the rules of politically accepted works which were serving the interests of mass culture, led to decades of censorship. Though the change of regime in 1965 had been followed by a few years of apparent release, the strict control of art continued till the end of the '80s. In this situation, the direction of composition was to some point a problem of avoiding a confrontation with the representants of the commission.

Along with choral works (seen as a good instrument of political propaganda), the cantata was one of the favoured genres in Romanian music, offering multiple contemporary ways to conceive the ensemble (by employing different combinations of voices with groups of solo instruments), aligned to the vision of the 20th century music,

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<sup>8</sup> Constantinescu, "De la țimbala la pianul de concert".

but also bringing the advantage of presence of text, which could be manipulated to express the socialist ideology.

There are many cantatas among the works of Herman, also other compositions for different voices and ensembles; the interesting fact about them is that they are not connected with communist ideas. His chosen direction was that of evoking Romanian personalities, political or cultured people, from the figure of the first Transylvanian voivode (*Gelu quidam Blaccus*, 1996) to that of Mihai Viteazul, ruler of the main Romanian territories at around 1600 (*Mihai Viteazul*, 1977) or to Pinteia Viteazul, an outlaw who had been active in the places of Herman's childhood (*Balada lui Pinteia Viteazul*, 1957). I have a supposition that Vasile Herman believed there had been a connection between his own ancestors and this hero: his family's name had originally been Pinteia, but during the Hungarian domination his grandfather had to change it with a Hungarian one (a request that affected all the Romanians in the dominated areas of Transylvania). Since he had been in the Austro-Hungarian army, and his Austrian general had appreciated his services, he was allowed to choose the name Herman. The composer did some research to find out more about his genealogy; he was convinced that on one side he belonged to an old Romanian noble family, and on the other he had peasants' origins.<sup>9</sup> He was talking about his roots with passion and pride, and the music reflected a profound connection with the past which he considered to be his own. He was full of admiration for the heroes that he evoked through his works. The attitude towards history was at the same time accepted by the regime and saved Herman from paying too much tribute to the political censorship. In fact, it was a way of avoiding the pressure of ideology.

Moreover, the archaic language used in some historical writings was appealing for Vasile Herman, since it corresponded to his disposition of evoking. The texts of Neagoe Basarab<sup>10</sup> (*Paleomusica*, 1980) or those of Dimitrie Cantemir<sup>11</sup> (*Cornul Inorogului* [*The Unicorn's Antler*], 2003) were a good match for his own musical language. They deepened the sense of allegiance to an ancestry, the connection with the historical past, tracing a line between old and new. In fact, this was the composer's artistic creed: to establish and maintain a perspective of the past through his music, to bring a new meaning through his art.

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<sup>9</sup> Herman frequently discussed on this matter in his late years. While I was visiting him to complete my PhD research, I heard many stories in which he was recalling childhood memories.

<sup>10</sup> Neagoe Basarab, ruler of Țara Românească in the sixteenth century.

<sup>11</sup> Dimitrie Cantemir, Romanian humanist scholar (encyclopedist, philosopher, musicologist and composer), ruler of Moldavia at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century.

### 2.3. *Imagination*

The third level of evocation: according to *The Cambridge Dictionary*, evocation has to do with “the fact of making someone remember or imagine something”<sup>12</sup>. Remembrance relates to recognition, as we already pointed out. But the other possibility, imagining, grants openings for creativity. It means not just imitating through music, painting musical landscapes, sensing the spirit of a territory; it also means using information about the past to create something new. Though it may be present throughout the whole career of Herman, this attitude is even more specific to his last 20 years. For a long period of time, his interest was oriented to the proofs (sometimes speculations) concerning the ancestors on Romanian territories. He was concerned not just with music, but with archaeological discoveries, historical and linguistic theories, surrounding himself with documents and writings on this matter. Therefore, he moved from recollection to imagination, “dreaming” about the possible music of an ancestral world, where the memories of living folklore and the scientific conclusions based on research were mixed with speculations on how the music of our ancestors may have sounded. This is a level of sublimation, where the suggestion surpasses the representation. The dream of the possible music of our ancestors is also represented by compositions named with words supposedly belonging to the ancient Thraco-Dacian vocabulary, an imaginative re-creation of a primitive musical environment. The aforementioned name *Hestia* (symphony for percussion instruments) is an allusion to an ancient deity, the goddess who watches the sacred fire. The term is also associated with the idea of *essence* or *heart* and continuous connection with the sacred moral and spiritual values. The same way, *Avrazax* for trombone and percussion ad libitum (2001) sends to a legend of the virgin foremother who brought to life the Divine Twins. Due to her torment during birthing, she was called The Angry, The Grieving (*Avrazax*), and linked to the goddess of war. The whole legend inspired other compositions: *Belagines* for small orchestra, 2004 (meaning *pure birth*, also *ancient laws*), *Hebriz-Elmos* for flute and clarinet, 2003 (the birthplace) and *Gemenii divini* [The divine twins] for two violins, 2009. We can also find works named with Thraco-Dacian terms, as: *Avlana*, 2004 (the first day of the week, dedicated to the mother-goddess), *Acamas*, 2006 (in some versions a Thracian hero, killed in the Trojan war), or *Aizis*, 2009 (a Dacian settlement, mentioned by emperor Trajan in his writings). Herman’s music of last decades embraces the idea of *essence*, with laconic melodic and rhythmic gestures implying the continuous evolution of essentialized material. Along with the timber effects, they are associated with a primitive world brought to life by composer’s imagination.

The passion for history (even obsession for the last years of life), determined Vasile Herman to search for the roots of Romanian tradition in music. As a researcher, he tried

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<sup>12</sup> *The Cambridge English Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/evocation>.

to detect the deepest layer of folklore, with elements which he borrowed for his own music. To represent the different stages in the evolution of folkloric material, Herman wrote in the first decade of the 21st century a *Thracian Requiem* and a *Profane Requiem*. The *Thracian requiem* uses a combination of texts which resemble to incantations, sending to the archaic pre-Christian rituals of passing. The music employs formulas of few sounds, according to the idea stated in theoretical studies that the intonation of few notes places many examples of autochthonous singing into the area of archetypes. The *Profane Requiem* is more connected with the tendency of evoking memories, since it uses an ensemble of women intoning their folkloric lamentations (*bocete*) which are by tradition part of the rituals of passing. The text is also more recent, combining Christian elements with pagan ritual reminiscences. And, as an interesting connection, between the sections of this work Herman added two instrumental moments, called *The memory of time*.

At the same time, the quasi-archaic language of Herman's opera libretto (2001) completes the mysterious atmosphere of the subject, in a ballade-like versification. After trying to collaborate with some librettists, Herman decided to write the text himself. The story involves folkloric mythological characters, starting with Pasărea Măiastră [the Enchanted Bird] who gives the name of the opera, to Făt-Frumos [Prince Charming] or the Magus, and tries a synthesis on different layers of meaning. For instance, the Enchanted Bird is not only an allusion to the mythological creature but recalls the embodiment of this ideal in the sculptural conception of Constantin Brâncuși. Through an intersection of layers, she is also identified as Ileana Cosânzeana, the ideal natural feminine beauty in Romanian fairy tales. Many symbols of Romanian culture and folklore are evoked and combined in an attempt to void the time disparity and to embrace peasants' art and culture in an artistic synthesis. The text of the opera brings allusions to the creed of Herman, as his fate seems to resemble partially that of Făt-Frumos, and partially that of the Magus. The verses in the second scene from the second act offer a self-portrait which underlines the inherent liaison between creator and memories. They define his song, his fate, his being, and his whole art is put under the sign of a *song of recollection*.

*Ce cântece vrăjite și ce "Viersuri de dor"  
M-adie, mă săgeată și amintiri mă dor  
O ființă zbcuimată fost-am din veci de veci  
Iar soarta-mi nu se-ndreaptă spre dalbele poteci (...)  
O, cânt al amintirii, o, viers de dor ce arde,  
El deapănă-n vecie al vieții mele caier.<sup>13</sup>*

What bewitched songs and what Verses of longing  
Caress me, arrow me and memories are hurting...  
A struggling creature I was from eternity,  
And my fate doesn't move to white paths (...)  
Oh, song of recollection, oh, burning verse of longing,  
It spins forever my life's tuft.

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<sup>13</sup> Herman, Opera *Pasărea măiastră*, second act.

## Conclusion

The moderated modernism in music is frequently understood as a retrograde attitude. Yet, when Western music tradition is combined with the inspiration that comes from folklore, we might witness an original synthesis. It was the belief of Vasile Herman, and he consistently followed this path. In his case, the inspiration found in tradition was not just a matter of choice, but an inner resort which affected his whole composition process. Placing the musical activity of Vasile Herman under the lens of his sense of evocation enlarges the understanding of his stylistic features. The liaison between tradition and innovation, and on the other hand between folklore and art music, is fundamental throughout his whole career. The evocation is a constant attitude, providing stylistic coherence, yet expressed in multiple ways, from the depiction of memories to evoking historical personalities or imagining and suggesting the possible music of an archaic world. The result of his musical activity confirms that the evocation can be expressed as “imaginative recreation”<sup>14</sup>. The selection of artistic means is determined by his evocative tendency and justified by his respect for the cultural artifacts. Ultimately, these all can be seen as memories in the safe of creativity.

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<sup>14</sup> *The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/evocation>.

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