

Pianist Serghei Covalenco – the accents of creative activity

Rezumat

Pianistul Serghei Covalenco – schițe la un portret de creație

Acest articol este dedicat maestrului Serghei Covalenco, unul dintre cei mai vestiți muzicieni din Republica Moldova – pianist, șef catedră Pian în anii '80 ai sec. XX, profesor universitar, Artist Emerit al Republicii Moldova. El are mulți discipoli care le transmit noilor generații de muzicieni tradițiile și principiile profesorului drag.

În interpretările lui S. Covalenco predomină muzica, spiritul creației, intelectul profund, logica gândirii artistice – tot ce a fost remarcat de mai mulți contemporani –, și anume bogăția uimitoare a culorilor muzicale ce depășește posibilitățile pianului cu coadă obișnuit, asemănătoare vocii omenești. Nu în zadar S. Covalenco a introdus în uz termenul vocal „de a intona la pian”. Libertatea admirabilă a interpretării i-a dat un caracter de meditație filosofică narațiunii emoționate, ceea ce îi captiva pe ascultători. Toate aceste calități îl făceau pe S. Covalenco unul dintre cei mai buni interpreți ai creațiilor romantice.

Cuvinte-cheie: Serghei Covalenco, pianist, profesor, catedra Pian, interpret, maestru de concert, Artist Emerit, muzică de cameră, creațiile compozitorilor din Republica Moldova, discipoli, școala pianistică.

Summary

Pianist Serghei Covalenco – the accents of creative activity

This paper is about one of Moldova's brightest musicians – Mr. Sergey Covalenco, a famous pianist, performer, Head of Piano Department in the Academy of Music, Theatre and Graphic Arts during the 1980-s, university professor, Distinguished Artist of the Republic of Moldova. His talent is recognized by many outstanding musicians. He has trained a lot of gifted pupils, who continue the traditions and principles of his school and share their knowledge with future generations.

The focal point of Serghei Covalenco's performance interpretations is music, the spirit of the piece, thorough understanding, logic of artistic thought and most certainly the surprisingly broad sounding range that is similar to human voice and by far exceeds the potential of an ordinary piano – i.e. all the aspects pointed out by many contemporary critics. It is Serghei Covalenco who was the first to apply the vocalism-related term 'to intonate' to piano performance. A surprising freedom of his performance could give it the aspects of philosophical thought and exciting story that fascinated and charmed the audience. All those qualities made Serghei Covalenco one of the best interpreters of romantic music.

Keywords: Sergey Covalenco, pianist, performer, Piano Department, brightest musician, accompanist, Distinguished Artist, chamber music, creations of Moldavian composers, public activity, gift, pupil, future generation, pianistic school.

While analyzing extraordinary phenomena in a nation's culture - and in particular phenomena relating to the nation's most outstanding representatives – an effort should be made to understand their sources and bring to light their unique features and their impact on subsequent generations. First of all, an accent should be made on artists who have discovered and created new directions, developing music as an art by their efforts and achievements in the relevant areas. An example of such an artist, a musician who heralded the golden age of Moldova's performing art is Mr. Serghei Covalenco, a pianist, professor, Distinguished Artist of the Republic of Moldova. Having come to know an outstanding talent, one is invariably curious about its sources, the beginnings,

and the initial impulse that has aroused an interest in music. According to Serghei, the future pianist's first musical impressions were due to the vocal performance of Maria Callas, an outstanding opera diva adored by Serghei's sister. His elder sister was collecting recordings of this brilliant opera singer and often listened to them together with her brother. He remembers outstanding vocalisms and operas which he could hear at home since the first years of his life; as a little child, he started loving music immensely because his first experience with it was listening to brilliant vocal performances. Search of other musical impressions was a logical consequence. Radio was the only available alternative source of music in the small provincial town of Nisporeni where Serghei

Covalenco was born on 03.11.1948 so the young musician was purposefully searching and listening to broadcastings of classical concert performances.

After the family moved to a somewhat larger town of Cahul, Serghei went to music school to continue his studies of music. The boy's self-motivation prompted him to go to school each day as early as at seven in the morning to do his piano practice because there was no piano at his parents' at that time. He was performing a large number of pieces from piano scores available from the school library. That was his way to expand knowledge of classical music and to improve his skills of performing and reading music from the score. A leading professor, Head of Piano Department in the Chisinau Conservatoire, Alexander L. Sokovnin noted the talented boy during a festival of Moldova's music schools. The professor suggested to the young pianist's parents that the boy move to Chisinau and join E. Coca Secondary Specialized Music School. The young pianist's professional development continued in Chisinau where he had auditions with two outstanding professors and musicians - V. Levinzon and A. Sokovnin. Luckily Serghei's mother, who could see and understand her son's unique talent at an early stage, followed her intuition and chose Alexander Sokovnin as his professor, thus giving the young pianist's training a decisive turn for the better. A. Sokovnin's teaching method was dramatically different from the generally accepted approach to teaching piano. Serghei's professor received his musical training at N.A. Rimsky-Korsakov Conservatoire in St. Petersburg; his teacher had been Leonid Nikolayev, an outstanding pianist and professor of piano practicing a unique approach to development and training of young musicians. Leonid Nikolayev used to say that *„a school can only put the musician on rails and it is up to the musician himself which direction he chooses to take in his further career”* [2, page 40]. Leonid Nikolayev believed it to be his duty as a teacher to give a foundation for the student to build on. Training yields fruit solely where a desire is engendered in the student to look for further knowledge and he has been assisted in developing adequate skills to master it. Artur Schnabel, an outstanding Polish-Austrian pianist and composer, shared Leonid Nikolayev's views by saying that *„the professor should open the door and it is up to the pupil to go into it”* [5, page 138]. A similar idea can be found in Boleslav Yavorsky's work, *„It is necessary to teach the basics as a general direction for each student to be able to choose his own road independently”* [4, page 39]. While developing his

gifted pupil and sharing experience and knowledge with him, Alexander Sokovnin made main emphasis on cultivation of the performer's culture adequate to understand and interpret the performed piece, of culture that gives the priority to artistic interpretation rather than technical drill in practice and places an accent on aesthetic aspects in any component of performing techniques. Alexander Sokovnin used to say that a professor should avoid turning into a coach; he should not try and make his student's task easier where the student can manage on his own; the professor should teach his students proper ways to learn. A true professor should not frighten his student away with too much criticism; rather, he should allow the performer freedom of expression and expand his student's horizons, cultivating in him love of painting, literature, drama, opera, and chamber performance. As early as in the 8th year of E. Coca ten-year music school (which Serghei Covalenco left in 1966), the young musician took a great interest in performing operas and symphonic music from clavier. He was studying the clavier for *Eugene Onegin*, an opera by Pyotr Tchaikovsky, during lessons as well as during breaks between lessons. He was captivated with this opera so much that he was hardly noticing anything around him. He was in love with music as such, without focus on individual composers. He was happy to provide accompaniment to any instrumentalist – a clarinetist, a violinist or a cello performer. There were many instrumentalists in the boarding school where he lived at that time; he never refused to accompany their performance, which is an indication of his kindness, responsiveness and broad-mindedness. His personal touch as a performer of romantic pieces was commented upon very often. His hands with pointed fingers were ideally suited for playing pieces by Frederic Chopin, Johannes Brahms, and Robert Schumann. Film Director B. Konunov wrote in his article *„A Musician is Born”* about these pointed fingers that *„were fluttering excitedly in their rush along the way the wonderful tune was taking them. These hands were quivering in excitement, elation and grief. They revealed Serghei's inner self – that of a downright romantic dreamer given to reflection”* [3, page 76]. In 1966 Serghei Covalenco won the first prize at Moldova's national competition of young performers. Critical reviews were commenting on the pianist's vivid personal performing touch, *„The reverent spirituality, an amazing emotional touch, and unusual sincerity of performance are this talented performer's specific characteristics that produce a lasting impression”* [3, page 78]. The audience was

particularly moved by his concert performance of Alexander Scriabin's *Etude* (op. 42 No. 5) and Nikolai Medtner's *Sonata-Reminiscenza*. The choice of these particular pieces by Professor Sokovnin's student demonstrated the professor's fondness of the Russian piano music and of Alexander Scriabin's pieces in particular; the professor had been performing them himself with great skill and spirit. The sincerity of Serghei Covalenco in his performance of Nikolai Medtner's *Sonata-Reminiscenza* brought tears to the eyes of many people in the audience. That was a lifetime experience. Subsequently, when Serghei was already a student of the Chisinau Conservatoire, he was singled out for his performance of Johannes Brahms' *Concerto no. 1 in D-minor* in the 3rd round of M.K. Čiurlionis international competition in Vilnius in 1968 where he won the third prize. The next stage of his development as a performer was his participation in the Soviet Union's Inter-Republican International Competition of Pianists held in Chisinau in 1969; Serghei Covalenco won the first prize there.

Professor Sokovnin paid much attention to performance and recording of pieces by Moldovan composers. The Music Academy's audio library includes recordings of his performances of Leonid Gurov's *Children's Suite for piano*; Vassily Zagorsky's *Sonata No. 1*; Solomon Lobel's *Lyrical Dance, Lullaby, Haiduk Dance, Story*; A. Stircea's *Romantic Suite, Scherzo, Song at the Cradle*. His performances can be considered a standard; they are characterized with high interpretation culture, clarity and in-depth understanding of the piece, romantic expressivity, and a refined and colourful sound. That is why his students had an inbred fondness of performing piano pieces of Moldovan composers.

When Serghei Covalenco was taking part in diverse competitions of performers, he included Moldovan music, such as Semyon Lungul's *Capriccio, Masks*, Vassily Zagorsky's *Etude Impromptu, Lullaby*, and A. Stircea's *Preludes* in his program.

Performing of piano pieces by Moldovan composers was a mandatory component of year-end exams for piano students at the conservatoire. Popularization of this music resulted in the demand for more new pieces to be created by Moldovan composers. Piano professors used to enter into creative alliances with individual composers. Such alliances were an incentive for creation of new pieces. Quite frequently a composer used to create a new piece intended specifically for a particular performer. Such performers included G. Strahilevici, A. Sokovnin, V. Levinzon, L. Vaverco, Serghei Covalenco, R. Seinfeld,

and A. Palei. They were performing pieces created by members of the Composers' Union of Moldova in many concerts and were the first to perform many a new piece. Subsequently they edited and compiled multiple collected volumes of scores for piano. At a later stage, in 1988 the creative alliance between V. Levinzon and Serghei Covalenco brought to life several collected volumes of scores for piano that included the most popular Moldovan pieces, such as A. Stircea's *Preludes, Improvisation and Toccata*, V. Rotaru's *Impromptu*, G. Mustea's *Joc haiducesc, Popas în Codru*, Vassily Zagorsky's *Malaghenia*, C. Rusnac's *Prelude*. These collected volumes of scores demonstrated the compilers' fondness of romantic music and Serghei Covalenco's influence on selection of the performer's expressive means. These scores are abundant in notes for performers, such as *tempo rubato, capriccioso, molto accelerando, passionato, risoluto, appassionato, espressivo, cantabile, dolcissimo*. This performance interpretation reflects the compiler's creative urge and musical imagination, inspiring young musicians with desire to learn more about the concerned piece and to include it in their concert repertoire.

Serghei Covalenco was under significant influence of Ms. Olga C. Silkina, Associate Professor, Head of Accompanist Skills Department and his professor of accompanist skills. Ms. Silkina graduated from the Odessa Conservatoire in the piano class and was employed as an accompanist with the Odessa Opera for several years after graduation. She was an extremely knowledgeable musician with a vast experience with opera music; she was sharing her extensive knowledge of opera, vocalism and instrumentalism with her students and expanding their horizons in multiple directions. When she taught Serghei Covalenco, they used to analyze a different operatic fragment at each lesson and determine the piece's tempo, character, style and orchestration, dwelling on the range of expressive means and voice part specifics. They were working intensively and with dedication to master an extensive repertoire; furthermore, the possibility to learn from an outstanding and erudite musician and professor, such as Ms. Silkina, had an overall positive impact on the performer. Ms. Silkina maintained creative and friendly ties with Sviatoslav Richter, a great Russian 20th century pianist with whom she had had a chance to work as a young post-graduate accompanist at the Odessa Opera. In all likelihood, it was mainly through her that Sviatoslav Richter became Serghei Covalenco's favourite pianist and performer.

Sviatoslav Richter often gave concerts in Chisinau during 1960-s and 1970-s. Each time the concert hall was packed to capacity with those who wanted to hear the great musician's live performance. Subsequently Serghei Covalenco was purposefully visiting Moscow to go to Richter's concerts and invariably attended Richter's concerts in St. Petersburg during 1971-1975 when he was taking an assistantship-internship course under Professor P. Serebryakov, student of L. Nikolayev who was the founder of the Leningrad (St. Petersburg) pianism school.

In 1975 Serghei Covalenco became a professor of Piano Department with the Chisinau Conservatoire, infusing new young blood in the Department's function to train professional musicians. In parallel the young professor was pursuing his performer career. Soon after he joined the Conservatoire a well-known violinist and Head of the Strings Department Alexander Causanschi proposed their giving joint concerts. The pieces chosen by A. Causanschi for the concert were Johannes Brahms' *String Sonatas*; the pianist was happy to approve this choice and thus they launched into their joint creative career. Serghei Covalenco recalls that on multiple occasions he listened to recordings of Johannes Brahms' *Sonatas* performed by diverse musicians at A. Causanschi's place and they had heated analytical discussions about these recordings. The next stage was to record their own performance and to analyze the recording. That way the two talented musicians were looking for the most sincere performance of their favourite pieces. Their concert was an astounding success. Their creative cooperation and friendship continued for many years. The word about the talented pianist who could be an accompanist as well as solo performer was quick to spread through the Conservatoire. Many instrumentalists and vocalists proposed joint concerts to the gifted pianist. During his concert career Serghei Covalenco collaborated on a friendly footing with many prominent Moldovan artists, such as Evgheni Verbetchi, Ion Josan, Mihail Muntean, Svetlana Strezeva, Svetlana Bodiul, Efim Bogdanovschi. Many people still remember well the chamber music concerts given by Serghei Covalenco jointly with E. Verbetchi at the Chisinau Organ Music Hall; the program included Johannes Brahms' and Leonard Bernstein's *Sonatas* and Mikhail Glinka's *Trio Pathétique in D minor* performed jointly with S. Vrincean (bassoon). Pavel Usaci, Distinguished Artist of Moldova, wrote about one of these concerts given on 17 May 1986 [1, page 24], „The both masters demonstrated truly miraculous performance skills

during that concert. The concert showed vividly the performers' main strengths – excellent school, high professionalism, outstanding musical talent, well controlled expressiveness, wisdom, clarity, and organized approach – i.e. the characteristics of a true master”. Subsequent concerts given jointly with E. Verbetchi included Paul Hindemith's *Sonata* and Igor Stravinsky's *Histoire du soldat*. Serghei Covalenco's solo concerts were similarly unforgettable; their program included Robert Schumann's *Études symphoniques* and *Humoreske in B-flat*, Frederic Chopin's *Ballades no. 3 and no. 4*, *Scherzo no. 3*, Ludwig van Beethoven's *Piano Sonatas no. 1, 3, 11 and 15*, Johannes Brahms' *Intermezzos* (op. 76, 116 and 118). Serghei Covalenco gave a concert at the Chisinau Organ Music Hall jointly with the well-known viola player (altist) T. Zimmerman, performing, among others, Jules Massenet's *Meditation*, Franz Schubert's *Arpeggione Sonata*, Johannes Brahms' *Sonata no. 1*; the recordings of these pieces are part of the Moldovan TV & Radio's 'golden audio library.' Also part of that library are the recordings of Serghei Covalenco performing Robert Schumann's *Waldszenen*, Carl Maria von Weber's *Grand duo concertant for bassoon and piano* (jointly with E. Verbetchi), Richard Wagner's *Tannhäuser Trio* (jointly with E. Buzila and N. Stolearceuc), Ludwig van Beethoven's *Triple concerto for violin, cello, and piano in C major* (jointly with N. Hosi and I. Josan), Victor Khodyashev's *Trio for violin, piano and cello* (jointly with A. Causanschi and N. Tatarinov).

According to Serghei Covalenco, in concerts he often performed certain pieces by Moldovan composers, such as St. Neaga's *Preludes, Basarabeasca, Joc*; S. Lungul's *Hora, Capriccio*; V. Zagorsky's *Lullaby, Etude Impromptu, Rhapsody for violin, two pianos and percussion* jointly with A. Causanschi (violin), S. Forosteani (piano), with D. Goia as conductor; L. Gurov's *Lullaby*; A. Stircea's *Preludes*; S. Lobel's *Poem*; C. Rusnac's *Prelude*. In October 1991 he performed B. Dobossarsky's *Trio* jointly with I. Josan and S. Duja in Iasi. In April 1986 he performed A. Sochireansci's *Sonata* in the Pillar Hall of Unions in Moscow. In February 1976 he played D. Chitenco's *8 piano pieces* and *Sonata for piano and oboe* during the young composers' festival in St. Petersburg. Serghei Covalenco recorded love songs to lyrics by well-known Romanian and Moldovan poets at the Moldovan TV & Radio jointly with the famous Moldovan soprano Maria Biesu and the chamber orchestra conducted by A. Samoila. These recordings formed the basis for a TV documentary. In 1991 Serghei Covalenco took part in the 'Evening with

the composer E. Doga' Event where he performed E. Doga's *Love Song*, *Scherzo* and *Ballad* jointly with I. Josan. This latter solo singer was also involved in Serghei Covalenco's multiple concerts to perform A. Stircea's *Sonata-Ballad for cello* and V. Rotari's *Love Song*. In vocal concerts Serghei Covalenco performed as accompanist V. Rotari's *Love Songs* to Eminescu's lyrics *Cand amintirile...*, E. Doga's *Love Songs* to M. Eminescu's lyrics *De-asi avea...*, G. Mustea's *Love Songs* to G. Vieru's lyrics *Trei mari iubiri* (with vocal solo by M. Muntean). Serghei Covalenco also performed pieces by Moldovan composers during concerts given in France, Germany, USA, Brazil, Portugal, Bulgaria, and Tunisia. The Moldovan national music and in particular S. Neaga's *Bsarabeasca*, *Joc*, S. Lungul's *Hora*, *Capriccio*, V. Zagorsky's *Lullaby* was received by the audience very well.

The focal point of Serghei Covalenco's performance interpretations is music, the spirit of the piece, thorough understanding, logic of artistic thought and most certainly the surprisingly broad sounding range that is similar to human voice and by far exceeds the potential of an ordinary piano – i.e. all the aspects pointed out by many contemporary critics. It is Serghei Covalenco who was the first to apply the vocalism-related term „*to intonate*” to piano performance. A surprising freedom of his performance could give it the aspects of philosophical thought and exciting story that fascinated and charmed the audience. All those qualities made Serghei Covalenco one of the best interpreters of romantic music and primarily of pieces by F. Chopin, R. Schumann, and J. Brahms. He was continuously in search of new colours and musical impressions; he was eagerly exploring opportunities to liaise with well-known musicians in diverse directions. He took several advanced training courses at the St. Petersburg Conservatoire (under professor A.I. Ikharev, 1981) and Moscow Conservatoire (under professors L.V. Roschina, L.N. Vlasenko, M.S. Voskresensky in 1985 and one more time under professors M.A. Smirnov and V.N. Chachava in 1988). Making good use of their support and guidance, C Serghei Covalenco additionally expanded his horizons and became a mature pianist. During 1981-1993 Serghei Covalenco was heading the department of piano and accompanist skills. He was combining his career as a performer with that of a professor and administrator. He taught and gave a start in life to many pianists, such as S. Forosteani, V. Tusmalova, I. Lutenco, I. Hatipova, A. Socolova. S. Jar who have become brilliant performers and prize-winners of diverse

international competitions and who are continuing with their performing and academic career. Serghei Covalenco is an authority in music and therefore he is often invited to be on the jury of diverse musical contests and to give master workshops. Listed below are some of the conservatories where he delivered master-classes and workshops for professionals: Uzbek Conservatoire (Tashkent, 1988), Uz. Gajibekov Azerbaijan Conservatoire (1990, 1991), Kazan Conservatoire (1991), J. Enescu Academy of Music (Bucharest, 1992), D. Lipati International Conference (Constanta, Romania, 1992), XVI Curso International de Verão Brazilia (Brazil, 1994), Universidade Catolica do Porto (Portugal, 2003, 2004), Academy of Music, Theatre and Graphic Arts (Chisinau, 2011, 2012).

He was invited more than once to be on the jury of international competitions held in Minsk in Belarus (1980, 1992); Vilnius in Lithuania (1982); Riga in Latvia (1984, 1989); Kazan in Tatarstan, Russia (1991); Chisinau in Moldova (1995, 1997, 1998); Khmel'nitsky in Ukraine (1992).

Serghei Covalenco's performing and professorial work was duly acknowledged by the Government of the Republic of Moldova: in 1989 he was awarded the title of a Distinguished Artist and the academic degree of Associate Professor; he became a full Professor in 1992. The second half of Serghei Covalenco's creative life was connected with work outside Moldova - in Brazil (1993-1995) and Portugal (since 1998). He is currently a professor of piano at the Arts Department of Universidade Catolica do Porto in Portugal. He has not terminated his performing career, taking part as a solo pianist and as an accompanist in concerts of diverse vocalists, instrumentalists and professors of music. He is also working in his home country as a consulting professor at the piano department, giving advice to young musicians who are students and undergraduates. His lectures are a revelation for students, bringing to light new facets and directions in understanding and mastering the secrets of performing. It is believed that performing musicians are not particularly fond of writing methodology and research papers. However the nature of their professorial activities makes them use words and commit these words to paper. Serghei Covalenco does not do it often. He wrote a piece titled „*Applying Hans von Bülow's key piano teaching principles in teaching of piano in the contemporary Soviet Union*” in the collected volume „*Piano Theory, History and Methodology*” that appeared in Chisinau in 1991. The writer provides an in-depth and thorough analysis

of the great pianist's artistic work and contribution in the development of piano performing art. The paper focuses on Hans von Bülow's significance as an educator and promoter of the music by R. Wagner, J. Brahms, P. Tchaikovsky that were hardly known in his time. According to records, Hans von Bülow performed L.V. Beethoven's *Sonata no. 29*, one of the great composer's most complicated pieces, twice in the same concert, thus demonstrating an

intense desire to bring complex piano pieces of that kind closer to the audience. The epigraph chosen by Serghei Covalenco for his paper deserves special mention because it reflects the writer's ambition and life objective, „*I have invariably been against misuse of the term 'artist' to describe brilliant performance – irrespective of the direction chosen by the musician. An artist is the person who has dedicated his total life to Art*” [4, page 138].

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