Gh. Asachi − Founder of the First Philharmonic Dramatic Conservatory in Moldova

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I never cease to rediscover Gh. Asachi. The information about this cultural personality is so vast that it leaves you the impression that not all has been said yet. His interest in so many fields of study is amazing and at the same time attractive for any initiate in the field of theatrical memoirism.

The historical context in which the idea of an education institution in Romanian came to life it was not one of the most favorable. The Phanariotes had been ruling the Romanian Principalities since 1716. The schools were the monopole of the Greeks and they were opened only for foreigners: "there is in the country, only one Greek school, in Iasi" (Negre 1882: 34).

The father, Lazăr (Leon) Asachi, who from that period stood out as one of the intellectuals of the time due to his cultural-enlightened interests, is, in fact, his son's first educator, being the first to inspire him the idea of encyclopedic knowledge, following the trends of the Transylvanian enlightenment. These first steps on his way to a more intense and wider study in various fields were decisive for the energy with which he was determined to accomplish great things, through what he, later on, created.

My intention is to speak highly of Gh. Asachi's contribution in putting the basis of the first Philharmonic-Dramatic Conservatory in Moldova. The first step was made in 1816, when the first theatrical core was created. Th. Burada tells us about this in his book: "Asachi, on his own expense, set up a *society theatre*, in the house of Costachi Ghica, opposite the Metropolitan Church, which later on became the property of Negroponti and Paltişanschi. He engaged a set painter as well as a fly man and transformed the house into a true factory. The main curtain was painted after a model from Rome, representing Apollo with the muses, reaching out for Moldavia to lift it" (Burada 1975: 85). His desire was to make these sets give the impression of a true theatre.

Let us not forget that Gh. Asachi was now at the end of a long journey throughout Europe, period in which he had the possibility to set down solid

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reference points for his further theatrical studies and interests. In 1808 he reached Rome. A city *flooded* with art and filled with history, suitable for his artistic, literary and theatrical expectations. From this period date his first poetic attempts, appreciated by the connoisseurs at his return in Moldavia.

The play chosen for the year 1816 was a pastoral, entitled *Myrtil et Chloe,* an one act play, adapted by Asachi himself after Gessner and Florian. The historicist T.T. Burada found interesting testimonies on this historic moment which stands for the beginning of the Romanian theatrical activity. To the audience's surprise, the performers were the children of the local noblemen, of the boyars Ghica and Sturza, and the roles were assigned as follows:

> Mrs. Şubin born Ghica, in the role of shepherdess Chloe, prince Ghica, in the role of shepherd Myrtil and Costachi Sturza, in the role of Lysis, the worshipper of Amor (Burada 1975: 85–86).

For there was no specialized institution in training professionals in the field of dramatic arts, the unceasing fighter Gh. Asachi would triumph by setting up, on November 15, 1836 the Philharmonic – Dramatic Conservatory - along with the minister of internal affairs (vornic) Şt. Catargiu and the guardsman (spătar) Vasile Alecsandri, the poet's father. This moment is celebrated in "Albina românească" (Iasi, 1837, pg. 69) as is results from the following quote:

> A society of boyars, desirous of music, have founded, a *Philharmonic – Dramatic Conservatory*, where free of charge (no charge) vocal music and declamation would be studied in the mother tongue. The following were chosen directors of the Conservatory: minister of internal affairs (vornic) Ştefan Catargiu, aga Gh. Asachi and guardsman Vasile Alecsandri, the latter being also named cashier of the Conservatory; the Conservatory was organized in a private house, close to St. Ilie. Mr. Paul Cervati, tenor, important artist, and Mr. Cuna started classes on last November 15 (year 1836), and one of the society's members was in charge with teaching declamation. Twelve ladies and young girls learn four times a week, and sixteen young boys in the afternoon. For giving the pupils a reason for practicing, the director suggested them to rehearse some plays which would be presented as theatrical experimentation. This establishment can influence, in a very useful manner, the discovering of musical talents and the organization of a national theatre, which stands for the true school of moral and the source of innocent pleasures (*apud* Burada 1888: 5–6).

The Conservatory was, in fact, a house with three rooms, which had been divided for the essentials of the activity. Thus, two of the rooms were used by the young students for their study and the other room was used as the teacher's room, being also the place where the school's archive was kept, in charge of the archive being the serdar Samoil Botezatu who was also the institution's secretary. This little house was situated near by St. Ilie Church, where the Technical School had been. Passing over the preconceived idea of the time and defying many mean boyars, a great number of young people enrolled in the first year of studies, and Eufrosina Corjescu and Dimitrie Gusti, former students of the Conservatory, were kind enough to give Burada the student's names: Mrs. Lang, Hostie and Elisaveta Fabian, Mrs. Eufrosina and Maria Corjescu, Maria and Ruxandra Ciuhureanu, Smaranda Dăscălescu, Anica Poni, Ana Clugher, Ana Metzker; and Mr. Teodor Stamati, Iancu

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Alecsandri, Nicu Casu, Enuţă, Ghiţă Căliman, Dimitrie Gusti, Ioan Albinetz, Neculai G. Măcărescu, Dimitrie Sterea, Emanoil Idieriu, Leon Filipescu, Gh. Stihi, Ioan Gheras, Dimitrie Gherghel, Ioan Ionescu, Neculai Verdeanu and I. Dimitriu. The first professors were Paul Cervatti and Cuna, at the class of vocal music, while Gh. Asachi, familiarized with this field from the time of his journeys abroad, mostly from taking part at different representations than by systematic study, was in charge of the class of mimic and declamation (Burada 1888: 141).

The first representation took place at the *Varieties Theatre* on February 23, 1837; the dramas put on stage were *Lapeirus* and *Văduva vicleană* or *Temperamentele* by Kotzebue, which were, as we have previously mentioned too, adapted by Asachi. The enthusiasm captured the inhabitants of the city so that four days before the performance, all the tickets were sold and the theatre resulted crowded. At this performance the orchestra also took part being conducted by P. Cervatti and it interpreted musical fragments from Rossini and Bellini. The representation began with a *Prologue* written by Asachi (Paiu 2000: 6), through which he was addressing himself to Moldavia, advising those present to be receptive to the "enlightment" through art.

> GHENIUS: Nu! Acel ce-n sin' păstrează de vârtute o scânteie/ Pentru-a Patriei folosuri nu se teamă ca să pieie!/ Pe-a Parnasului verzi plaiuri timpul este mai senin,/ Sună dulce armonie, suflă zefirul mai lin,/ Acoló a ostenelei trainic rod tu vei culege,/ Între noapte şi lumină, o, Moldavio, alege! (Burada 1975: 142–143).

The Prologue was performed by Alecu Asachi, who was interpreting the part of Ghenius and Mrs. Fabian – The Goddess of Moldavia. The following, also played in *Lapeirus:* I. Ionescu, as Lapeirus, Mrs. Lang, as Adelaide, Mrs. Hostie, as Malvina, Alexandru Asachi, as Tomai, Malvina's son, Iancu Alecsandri as Henri, Adelaide's son, Ghiţă Căliman as the captain of a French sheep. In *Văduva vicleană or Temperamentele* played Mrs. Fabian, as the widower, Samoilă Botezatu, as Boureanu, Ghiţă Căliman, as major Tulbure, Ioan Dimitriu, as Mii-de-flori, Ioan Albineţ as judge advisor Della, Alecu Asachi as Piruel "dance-master" and Dimitrie Gusti, as count Pipirig (Burada 1975: 143; Alterescu 1965: 170).

Due to its success, the play was put on stage once again at the audience's request, three days later. After this second representation, when the audience was even more numerous, the Conservatory's library received a large number of volumes and the institution as a whole developed:

> Apart from the plays created, translated or adapted in Moldavia, the institution's repertoire is enriched with 17 plays, translated, printed and played in Bucharest which were given to the director of the Conservatory in Iasi by Rasti, commissary from Greater Walachia, as *the Repertoire of the National Theatre.* Actors are also hired, of course, being recruited from the institution's students (Alterescu 1965: 171–172).

The third representation of the students from the Conservatory in Iasi took place on April 8, 1937, and it included two new plays: the drama *Prince Petru Rareş,* in two acts and the comedy *Contrabandul or Întunecimea de lună*, in two acts, both adapted by Gh. Asachi. The students which performed on this occasion were: M. Cerchez, as Petru Rareş, Costachi Strat, as provost marshal Şeptelici, I.

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Ionescu, as the old Cerinat, I. Docan as Malaspina, Mrs. Lang, as young Elenaand, Mrs. Hoştie as the Young Lady. The drama was put on stage once again on April 30, at the audience's request. It was followed by an idyll with songs and dances known as *Armindenea*, written by Asachi in honor of the spring. With this representation concluded the first theatrical season in Iasi.

Interested in setting up a true cultural program, extremely precise, which reminds us of Asachi's positive thinking, Gh. Asachi supports and writes about the entire dramatic activity of the Conservatory in his chronicles, thank you letters and posters, all published in the pages of the "Albina" Journal. Moreover, once the theatrical season ended, he continues editing the texts forming the theatrical repertoire, in the printing house of the Albina Institute. From the plays printed as part of *The Repertoire of the Romanian Theatre in Moldavia*, we mention: *Norma*, tragedy by F. Romani, Iasi, 1838, *Pedagogul*, comedy-vaudeville by Kotzebue, Iasi, 1839, *Fiul pierdut*, drama by Kotzebue, Iasi, 1839.

In the meantime, all the necessary steps are taken by the Conservatory's leadership, by letters sent to the Prince, for obtaining the necessary funds in order to continue supporting the activity of the new institution (see Burada 1975: 145–154).

The second theatrical season opened on October 17, 1837 with regular performances, twice a week; season tickets are distributed for 24 representations, at the price of 15 ducats for the first row, 12 ducats for the second row and 10 ducats for the third row (Burada 1975: 145–154).

Another important moment is represented by the first lyric representation in Romanian, on February 20, 1838, of Bellini's piece, *Norma,* for the benefit of professor Paul Cervatti. The student taking part were: Mrs. Lang as Norma, Elisabeta Fabian as Adalgisa, Hoştie as Clotilda, Mr. Dimitrie Gherghel as Flavius, Constantin Gheras as Orevezo and Paul Cervatti as Polion. The performance did not have the expected success because of the play's difficulty level and because the interpreters did not have enough musical technical practice. Constantin Paiu comments the situation: "its staging [*Norma*], given the conditions of those times and the students' training level, appears to be a gesture of risky performance" (Paiu 2000: 3–4).

The opera *Norma* had a second representation as well and the house was, once again, full. In spite of the competition of the time represented by the foreign theatrical companies acting in Iasi at that time, the echoes of this performance were as positive as the first time.

The effect of these performances in Romanian worried both the authorities of the time due to the text's political substratum and also the students' parents which were terrified of the idea that their children "were not learning" but were intending to follow a "shameful" acting career (Burada 1975: 167).

Because the Conservatory could no longer receive any subsidies, nor from private people or from the prince, after only two years and a few months, this institution's teaching activity ceased.

The same thing happened to the Philharmonic School in Bucharest. Thus, until 1859, the researchers do not mention the existence of any other information related to the setting up of any institution of culture similar to those until then within the Principalities.

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The important thing is that the students trained here managed to eliminate the amateurishness from theatrical performances and increased the need of this kind of institutions of culture.

As long as Asachi was director of the Conservatory, he occupied various positions simultaneously, being at the same time company and scene director and he most certainly provided advised scenography suggestions, thanks to the training from his period as a student.

For the period in which Asachi was director of the Conservatory, he occupied various functions simultaneously, being at the same time head of the theatrical company, stage director and he definitely provided competent scenography suggestions thanks to his own experience from when he was a student.

As a teacher, he used to ask his students to be informed as much as possible, he encouraged them to read so they would be capable of fully understanding the parts they were going to play, as well as to develop the sense of value.

In his teaching activity, his experience as a student at plastic arts while in the capital of the Habsburg Empire, was of great help to him. So, the teaching system put into practice included, in fact, fundamental elements for any type of artistic education. In selecting the future students at dramatic art, Asachi the professor relied mainly on the innate acting ability of the young, better said, on the talent which was so often mentioned later on by I. L. Caragiale, the master of Romanian drama. Then, Asachi was interested in the physical aspect of the candidates and in their mobility and capacity to adapt to the artistic expression. As a matter of fact, there criteria are still valid nowadays.

Thanks to the continuous efforts of the teachers and of the students as well as, to the passion and the enthusiasm of new beginnings, the young students developed, in a short period of time – just a few months of study, enough qualities for putting on stage performances in Romanian.

Lead by the desire of finding more information about Asachi, I also arrived at the Archive of the National Theatre Museum, institution housed until recently in the old house of V. Alecsandri, the poet's father[1], situated near the former St. Ilie church. Here there were gathered and kept data about actors, repertoire, theatrical posters as well as many other objects which belonged to those who charmed the audience with their talent along the years, as well as information about stage managers and theatre directors. All of them continue living through their names written on posters or in the notices kept in the Museum's library. This is how I came to discover Asachi's "traces": a photo reproduction of the first curtain from 1816, created by Asachi himself, the original of the play *Pedagogul* and a sheet of paper from his paper factory in Piatra Neamt, paper dated 1847. There, there is also a file with documents, letters, texts etc, manuscripts belonging to his family members, as well as the original of Asachi's epitaph, which can be seen on his tomb. Most documents are written with Cyrillic letters, and two of them are in French. From another document studied results clearly Asachi's aspiration to create something important for the foreigners too. The following quote, captures this idea entirely:

[1] Nowadays, the house is no longer the headquarter of the National Theatre Museum, as, after being claimed, it was retroceded; it represents a great loss for the local and national cultural patrimony.

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> In order to give the foreigners an idea about the country's history, he translated into French and published, *Nuvele istorice ale Romaniei*, a collection of his poems, respecting the rules of prosody, which he adapted to the language's character and many other fragments from Latin, French and German[2].

After the Conservatory closed, some of its former students, noticing the lack of official support from the divan in continuing the teaching activity, lose their interest for the theatre completely and stop playing. Other, which turned out to be more passionate and more dedicated to the Romanian theatre, took advantage of every chance they had to get on stage, even if along with foreign actors. For some of them, Costache Caragiali's theatrical activity after the dissolution of the Conservatory, in Iasi was salutary. Being in a continuous search of the most appropriate cultural climate for his theatrical manifestations, Caragiali arrives in Moldavia and he begins his theatrical activity in Botoşani, where he puts the basis of a theatrical company with which he would perform in the season 1838-1839 various plays, both originals and translated, among which there was also Gh. Asachi's play, *Ştefan cel Mare*. Arrived in Iasi, Caragiali takes over part of the former students of the Philharmonic – Dramatic Conservatory, and they are joined by students from the philosophy class from the *Academia Mihăileană;* he manages to put on stage with them Alfieri's tragedy *Saul*, on September 16, 1839. As we can notice, Asachi's contribution to the development of the theatrical activity in Moldavia also consisted in enriching the dramatic repertory with original writings or translations of plays considered to be successful at that time.

Gh. Asachi also played an important role in the journalistic field. In Moldavia, he is the initiator of the newspapers in Romanian, activity which was of great interest for him and which allowed shaping the idea of nation within the people's conscience. Through the newspapers, he supported the necessity of using art and culture in educating people.

Apart from his journalistic activity, one of his major accomplishments remains the inauguration, in 1835, of the *Academia Mihăileană*. One year before, in 1834, he had founded the first primary school for girls, known as *The Institute for educating girls.* In fact, even from 1813, Asachi was in charge with organizing the schools in Moldavia, activity which he would continue for almost forty years, until 1849 (Negre 1882: 56–58)[3].

[2] From the archives of the Museum "Vornic V. Alecsandri" − Muzeul Literaturii Române Iaşi, *Gheorghe Asachi. Biography*, p. 3.

[3] Here we find an extremely interesting piece of information about Asachi's efforts to protect the interests of the Romanian education in Moldavia: "In the time when Asachi acted as agent in Vienna (1822 – 1827) he visited and consulted various libraries from Vienna and Galicia, and made one of the most valuable discoveries for the Romanian schools. In the libraries in Galicia he found the documents through which Prince Vasile Lupu had given to the schools the buildings of the Trei Ierarhi Monastery in Iasi and the three estates from Tămăcheni, Agiudeni and Rădicheni in Roman county […]. In 1827, Gheorghe Asachi, returning from Vienna, presented the Prince the documents he had found in Poland, and asked him to give back the old use of the buildings and the lands, so that he could organize and open the Romanian schools". His request was approved only in 1846, on March 27, after long debates within the divan, in front of which, the fervid supporter of the cause presented his arguments more than once, just like Asachi's biographer mentions in the same paper, at page 59.

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The effort and the love with which Gh. Asachi dedicated himself to fulfilling his ideas – which we now refer to as projects – deserve our praise. We completely devoted himself to the idea of enlightened nation and created as much as he possibly could, given the political circumstances of the time. As a never tired fighter, he broke down the old conceptions and managed to bring up a belief and a desire.

In order to underline, once again, the pedagogical and educational virtues of theatrical art, I will quote Asachi himself:

"The purpose of theatre is, by pleasant means which present the meaningful activities of men, to teach the moral, to make them cherish virtue and praised deeds, to slander the evil and criticize the habits laugh worthy, and keep them away from them" (*** 1976: 39).

This was the concept and the principle Gh. Asachi started from in defining the theatre's role. This idea was strengthened by those in charged with the responsibility of directing the National Theatre in Iasi, in 1840.

The guiding lines set in 1836 by the first professors of the Philharmonic – Dramatic in Iasi served as the basis of the criteria for organizing the teaching system of the institution and its functioning in 1860, year which celebrates the rebirth, this time long lasting of an institution which had proved, in the difficult years of the beginning, that, served with the enthusiasm, commitment and strength of people like Gh. Asachi, it could face inertia, distrust and dilettantism.

He was followed, in time, by Costache Caragiali, Matei Millo, Mihail Kogălniceanu, Vasile Alecsandri and C. Negruzzi which found a well organized system which provided them the possibility of perpetuating the cultural inheritance which Gh. Asachi, with a lot of effort, managed to put together.

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Abstract

It is difficult to be obliged to confine ourselves to a few lines in making a presentation, especially a general one, when it comes to such a subject as the multi-talented personality of Gheorghe Asachi. The portrait of the young Gh. Asachi should include, without qualification, designations such as: hard working, self-confident, optimistic, and tenacious. All these qualities were the strong suits of an unparalleled talent, who was unsurpassable in his time. The numerous fields of activity that he initiated and developed and in which he is considered a pioneer are impressively vast. Asachi was an engineer, a professor, a diplomat, a sketcher, a journalist, a painter, a printer, an archivist and a playwright. Driven by a strong love of country, Gh. Asachi returned in 1812 to Moldavia after his studies abroad. He acquired a solid education in both humanistic and scientific disciplines, which was superior to many of his contemporary intellectuals; he spoke many foreign languages, including Polish, Russian, Latin, German, Italian, French and English like no other in his time did. From this point on, he will play an important role as the founder of the institutions needed in the development of a modern state and required by the historical reality of a nation.

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