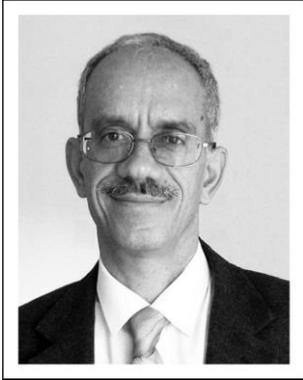


# CRISTINA ȘUTEU – *MUSICAL CRITICISM.* *PERIEGESIS, EXEGESIS, HERMENEUTICS*

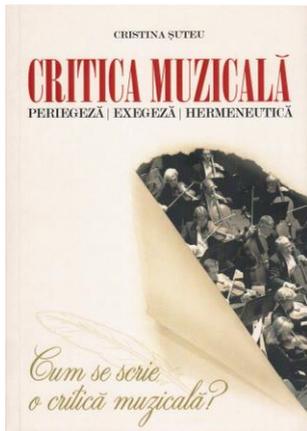
*Review*

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Cristina Șuteu,  
*Critica muzicală. Periegeză, exegeză, hermeneutică.*  
*Cum se scrie o critică muzicală?*

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Subtitled "How to Write Musical Criticism?", the book authored by Mrs. Cristina Șuteu, a musicologist by vocation, offers an exceptional insight into the issues addressed, being published this year at the RISOPRINT Publishing House in Cluj. It is by all means an instructive, enjoyable and

profitable read. But what does musical criticism still represent today? Before giving an answer to this malicious question, let us remember the experiences we have too often had in concert halls, where, much as we enjoy the audience's presence, we sadly notice that some of them lack even the minimum education that would enable them to appreciate the musical-artistic event. Those in question, totally unimpressed by the unique atmosphere of concert or opera halls and utterly incapable to adopt what is called an aesthetic attitude, seem totally unaware of the reason why they attend such events of high standing, which true music lovers would happily enjoy in silence. Moreover, apart from their disturbing activities (whispering, walking, coughing, the constant fiddling with the cell phone etc.), I have often noticed that there is no concordance between the performers' art and the intensity of the applauses that reward their efforts and skill.

In the *Foreword* to this book I pointed out that the local reality of musical criticism is hampered by the limited circulation of the strictly specialized journals and by the lack of interest of the usual publications in culture, which deprives the public of a useful tool for aesthetic or even behavioural education. Cristina Şuteu points out that "in relation to the public – people with aspirations, achievements or failures, more or less sensitive to his voice – the critic will show respect and responsibility towards art and, why not, towards the efforts to offer the public a drop from the ocean of music, perceived by each in their own way. Dedicated to the 'service of the public', the critic combines knowledge with the consciousness of responsibility" (p. 246).

Let us not forget that the functions of criticism, as they were formulated by Albert Thibaud and quoted in the book, cover three areas: journalistic – informing the public, pedagogical – educating musical taste and cultural – valorisation of art" (p. 247). Thus, "the critic may be perceived as an educator of the taste for art, for value, for the beautiful", although his purpose "is not to expect the public to accept all of his views – because, after all, criticism is an opinion, not an absolute truth –, but to stimulate their thinking" (p. 250).

As the title anticipates, the book is structured in three main parts: the first part is a historical overview (the past), while the second one is an exegetical analysis of the destinies of a well-pedigreed specialized publication, which includes almost the entire Romanian music history – *Revista Muzica* [The *Muzica* Journal].

The third part, defined as hermeneutical, is dichotomously split into two relevant and necessary chapters: the theory of criticism and the work methods used by some leading researchers (which marks the passage from historiography to the timelessness of the proved or plausible theories), and the

“musical criticism workshop”, which is the original research product, i.e. the moment when the perfect legitimacy of the author’s theory on musical criticism can be proved.

The overview stirs our interest in finding some relevant details. Thus, the “periegesis”, the long journey, starts from the roots of the phenomenon, i.e. from literary criticism (“the first foray into history”). Next comes the investigation of criticism from the perspective of journalism (“the second foray into history”), with a geographical contextualization of the seminal publications, a chronology covering the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries (*The Spectator*, *The Musical Times*, *Critica musica*, *Wiener musikalische Zeitung*, *Sentiment d’un harmophile sur différents ouvrages de musique*, *Revue musicale*, *I teatri*, *Rassegna musicale*, *Curierul rumânesc* – to name but the “pillars” of a much broader phenomenon) and a list of critics of high repute (E.T.A. Hoffmann, Robert Schumann, Richard Wagner, Eduard Hanslick, Hugo Wolf, Theodor W. Adorno, Hector Berlioz and Claude Debussy, and the Romanian critics Nicolae Filimon and Iuliu I. Roșca, respectively). The second part, which provides an admirable and perfectly structured history of the *Muzica* journal, revolves around an illustrative quotation from Mihail Jora: “History is based on documents and not on resentments”; and the author of the book explains: “I have opted for four interrelated leading ideas, targeting the journal’s **subtext** (*experimentum crucis* – a discreet allusion to the critical and analytical approach of Robert Hooke and Isaac Newton), its **context** (cultural, economic, political and technological-scientific – a comprehensive, detailed and image-based presentation that “enables us to determine *why* and *how* it was written, meaning that sometimes, someone *who* published in a specialized journal had to know *what*, *with what means* and *when* they wrote”), its **intertext** (a literal corpus consisting of isolated fragments reunited into a final intelligible “mosaic”, and the “con-C-E-P-T of the temporal matrix”) and its **text** (“passages of musical criticism”). [...] The first one raises an issue, the second one discusses upon it, the third one concludes it, and the fourth one exemplifies it.” We are offered here “four temporal perspectives: pre-war (1916), inter-war (1919-1925), post-war (1950-1989) and post-revolutionary (1990-2014)”, corresponding to the four factors: “the cultural factor *in nuce* (1916), the cultural-economic one (1919-1925), the cultural-political one (1950 - 1989) and the cultural-scientific one (1990-2014)”, with the “four ideational threads – *cultural, economic, political* and *technological*” being coded in the already known acronym C-E-P-T.

The last part, which starts from the correct observation that “no theory of musical criticism has been written in Romania so far-”, offers five

paradigmatic perspectives on musical criticism: Michel Dimitri Calvocoressi – *Principles and Methods in Musical Criticism*, London, 1923, Ernest Newman – *A Musical Critic's Holiday*, New York, 1925, Oscar Thompson – *Practical Musical Criticism*, New York, 1934, Armand Machabey – *Traité de la critique musicale*, Paris, 1947, Alan Walker – *An Anatomy of Musical Criticism*, Philadelphia, 1968. The graphic summaries of each of the sources analysed allow the drawing of conclusions for this segment of the thesis: “we notice a common element: the evaluative act involves both analysis and intuition, both reason and emotion; and the quality of criticism lies in the art of balancing the two powers that give weight to the judgement of value” (p. 237).

The last chapter, “Musical Criticism Workshop”, offers a humorous approach to the problem of competences, illustrated by the acrostic MENTOR, highlighted in bold and detailing the indispensable qualities of a critic: “**minuteness in analysis, extensive experience, neutrality in evaluation, talent, organized knowledge, responsibility towards art**”. In addition to the qualities of a critic, this chapter also outlines the functions of criticism and the “stages of the critical process in relation to the artistic event” (documentation, observation and elaboration, with their related stages).

In conclusion, the author presents the results obtained (see the explicit and suggestive chart on p. 291) and proposes a surprising and suggestive “rationalization of the critical act” (p. 292), represented as a “reflecting-cube” that “corroborates the mirror image with the six possible variants of the critical act, which oscillate between subjectivity and objectivity”. The originality of the investigation is also revealed in the form of a gradual, lucid, honest and perfectly ordered list of ten points, which also reflects the fulfilled objectives of the study.

At the end of this exceptional musicological undertaking, the musical critic – the author emphasizes – “remains a judge without a civil code and a translator without a dictionary”, a “subtle detector of the *kitsch*”, a “judge and inheritor of the code of aesthetic values, taken from the great minds of his past”, “a translator of the meanings of his masters’ music” [...]; he is “the voice of Laocoon and Cassandra in his generation and on the streets of public thinking; but when he is absent, he becomes a Momus [the ancient Greek god of irony and sarcasm], unworthy of writing criticism and worthy of being criticized!” (p. 296).

“The critic remains an *elegans formarum spectator*”, concludes Cristina Şuteu, quoting Terence, and so I am left with the task of giving you five reasons to read this book.

Therefore:

1. The research study is utterly original and unique in Romanian musicology, which until now has lacked a theory of musical criticism.
2. The work is carefully structured, covering the entire spectrum of the theme proposed.
3. The bibliographic documentation is extensive, robust and relevant, being conducted in great European libraries and in other countries of the world.
4. During the period of preparation of the book, the author has become an active critic, with remarkable results.
5. This volume has a well-defined target audience: it is designed for those who want to know what lies behind the critical act, and, in particular, for the young musicologists who want to become musical critics themselves.

Add to this short list the elevated language, an impeccable editing (credit to the author) and an inspired graphic design, the trademark of a well-established publishing house.

Therefore, while being aware that art cannot exist without criticism, and that the judgement of value is not only an end in itself, but also a means of promotion based on aesthetic ideals, let us proceed to discover the avatars of this field of musical criticism, which, through Mrs. Cristina Şuteu's effort and imagination, has emerged from the shadow to which ignorance and the phenomenon of substitution of artistic values have thus far confined it.