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THE GOLDEN STAG FESTIVAL IN CEAUSESCU'S ROMANIA (1968-1971)

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Abstract: After his appointment as leader of the Romanian Communist Party in 1965, Ceausescu was very interested in gathering popular support for his economic plans. It was in this context that Romanian television could contribute for a short while to a liberalization of Romanian mass culture by means of cultural and entertainment programmes. Between 1968 and 1972, Romanian television (TVR) organized the international pop music festival 'Cerbul de Aur' (the Golden Stag), which brought together some of the best European singers at the time.

Keywords: Romanian television, history of European television, communism, television events, music festivals

1 Context

In the 1960s, in the context of a general de-sovietization of the country, Romanian television (TVR) assembled a team of dedicated broadcast professionals under its roof who took advantage of the political situation in the country. In May 1958, the leader of the Romanian Communist Party at the time, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej convinced Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader to withdraw his army from the Romanian territory. This marked the beginning of a nationalistic turn in Romania. When Ceausescu was appointed at the head of the Communist Party in 1965, he continued the efforts of de-sovietization of Romania and sought to gather popular support for his reign and ambitious economic plans that envisioned to transform one of the poorest European countries into a prosperous industrialized state

Against the backdrop of these events – characterized by attempts at de-sovietization and Ceausescu's efforts to gain popular support for his reign – Romanian television contributed shortly to the liberalization of Romanian mass culture and more specifically, it helped loosen the official political discourse by promoting highly cultural and entertaining programs. The cultural nationalism promoted by Ceausescu's regime at the time meant a break from the influence of Soviet culture on Romania¹, an opening towards the West, including towards important figures in Romanian exile

¹Russian was no longer obligatory in schools after 1963, while the last Party Congress that promoted Marx and Lenin took place in 1969

which had been dismissed during the Stalinist years of Romania's communist regime.²

It is within this political and institutional context of Romanian television, that *Cerbul de Aur* or in translation, the *Golden Stag* festival emerged. The *Golden Stag* was an international music festival held in the city of Brasov, organized and broadcast by Romanian television annually from 1968 until 1971.

2 The Golden Stag Festival

2.1 Sources

My discussion of the *Golden Stag* festival in this article is based on different sources: a personal interview with Valeriu Rîpeanu³, the vice-president of Romanian Radiotelevision (RTV) at the time; and the 1969 file⁴ on the *Golden Stag* festival at the Radio Archives. During 1968 and 1971, RTV published, for each edition of the festival, a booklet containing all the names of the contestants as well as interviews with them. These booklets are now available at the library of Romanian television and to a great extent limited for access of others than RTVs employees) at Romanian television and they speak implicitly of an era in which, Connie Francis, for example, could talk freely in the Romanian media. Additional information on the festival, which I've also used for the purposes of this article, is available as part of the collection of memoirs by former TVR employees, published in the anthology *Viziune TELE* (Romanian Television, 1996).

2.2 The Festival's Coming About and Its Organization

In 1968, Romanian Radiotelevision found itself under the tutelage of the Committee of Radio and Television (formed by one president and four vice-presidents, including an administrative and a technical vice-president). Under the hierarchy of the Committee of Radio and Television, operated the director general of television, who in turn supervised the editors in chief of the broadcast institution.

When Octavian Paler director general of television⁵ at the time, came up with the idea of the festival, the vice president responsible for culture and entertainment was appointed president of the international jury at the festival.⁶ In 1968 and 1969 this was Ioan Grigorescu, which was replaced afterwards by Valeriu Rîpeanu. The original president of the Committee at the start of the festival was Valeriu Pop, followed later by Bujor Sion⁷.

All these people, together with Octavian Paler laid the first foundation stones for the festival, obtained the necessary

² Constantin Brancusi who had died in Paris in 1967 in Paris became a symbol of the Romanian socialist culture, while Mircea Eliade, who was living in Chicago and Eugene Ionesco living in Paris were invited to participate in televised interviews who were later broadcast on television. In 1967, for instance, reporter and programme maker Manase Radnev briefly interviewed Eugen Ionesco about his new play *The New Indweller*, which was going to be staged in Bucharest after having been published in Paris in 1958 (see further: tape 139614, TVR Multimedia Archives, Bucharest).

³ I also took into consideration an interview Rîpeanu gave for the television programme *Retrovizor*, produced by Irina Negru, (TVR), in which he presents the same story.

⁴ The Radio Archives also contain documents referring to TVR, institution to which the Radio was bound until 1994. But these documents are not catalogued. The *Golden Stag* from 1969 is, thus, a personal discovery, as well as the *Golden Stag* file from 1973.

⁵ Paler was co-opted as part of TVR's management just a few months after having begun his diplomatic mission in Rome. See *Viziune TELE*, op. cit., p. 156.

⁶ Each country represented in the festival had an appointed member in the jury, which meant the jury comprised of up to 25 members.

⁷ In 1970, new members were appointed in charge of Romanian Radiotelevision.

approvals from Ceausescu and had power over the decision making process.. Among them, it's also worth mentioning Tudor Vornicu, programme director, whose biography still remains unsettled⁸, but who has undeniably had been a luminous figure in Romanian television. Other professionals involved in the first editions of the *Golden Stag* festival were: Valeriu Lazarov⁹, who directed the first edition and Alexandru Bocanet who directed subsequent editions; people in the cultural departments at the Romanian Communist Party's Central Committee – such as Dumitru Popescu, chief of press and culture and Paul Niculescu Mizil, chief of propaganda – as well as Ion Gheorghe Maurer, prime minister at the time, who granted the financial means that made the organization of the festival possible. The names of these important political figures are mentioned because when it comes to the *Golden Stag* festival, they had a role in ratifying or delaying Ceausescu's approval.

TVR first organized the festival four years in a row from 1968 to 1971. The festival invited renowned European singers to perform on the stage in Brasov, such as: Amália Rodrigues, Rika Zarai, Rita Pavone (1968), Julio Iglesias, Cliff Richard, Juliette Greco (1969), Connie Francis (1970), Dalida, Enrico Macias, Charles Trenet (1971).

Originally based on ideas developed under the lead of Octavian Paler and endorsed by 'a decision of the Romanian Communist Party Central Committee concerning cultural activities in the domain of pop music'¹⁰, the *Golden Stag* festival represented a step forward for renewing Romania's cultural relations with the West, which had suffered since the proclamation of the Popular Republic at the end of 1947. It also represented an effort to integrate Romanian television within the European broadcasting scene, showcasing it as adhering to the same standards of quality.

2.3 The Event

This article will focus on the second edition of the festival, which took place between 5 and 10 March 1969. The discussion on the 1969 edition of the festival is based on an archival written file entitled 'Cerbul de Aur' located at the Romanian Radiobroadcast Society (SRR).¹¹ The file contains extensive information on this particular edition: from data on the preparation of the event, its costs, its location, and information on negotiations with the invited stars. The file does not contain letters from audiences to the Romanian television, which I will address later on in the article.

The Golden Stag was a five-day event taking place every year in the summer. Its realization was based on Romanian television's cooperation with the State Committee for Culture and Arts¹², the Radiobroadcasting Composer's Union and last, but not least, a group of ten professionals. In 1969 these were: Octavian Paler (president), Tudor Vornicu (festival director), Longin Albu (economic director), Radu Anagnoste (general secretary), Valentin Lazarov (stage director), Nicolae Iov (technical director), Anton Necșulea (sound director), Paul Urmuzescu (music secretary), Armand Crintea (production director) and Dinu Sararu (playright, responsible with the printing of promotional material).

⁸ Vornicu is known as the best Romanian producer of television entertainment. He was allegedly linked to the Romanian communist secret services, the Securitate, which allowed him to work as a press correspondent in Paris in 1960-1965. Several authors (see Annie Musca, *Tudor Vornicu*, Focsani, Terra editions, 2008; Clara Mares, *Zidul de sticlă. Ion D. Sârbu în arhivele Securității*, Curtea Veche, 2011, p. 402-403; documents in the National Archives files e.g. ANIC, Decret 172/1961 State Council's Collection) have supported the hypothesis that Vornicu was a captain enrolled in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, involved in counter-espionage activities, who might have taken place in the communist repression at the end of the 1950s in Romania.

⁹ Lazarov was among the first best directors of Romanian television. He was born in 1935, joined the broadcast institution in 1959 and emigrated 9 years later to Spain, then to Italy. He started his career by imitating Averty's way of filming and became known for his fast editing and montage. In his later career, he became one of the most important people in Berlusconi's television networks. At the end of his career, he produced entertainment shows with his production company Prime Time Communications, delivering formats that were also presented after 1995 on Romanian public and private television channels. He died in 2009. His view Romania was that of being a regime of aesthetic censorship, which was more manifest than in other socialist countries and which eventually impregnated a particular mentality and work practice that didn't have much to do with the imposed ideology.

¹⁰ The Committee for Radio and Television, Information regarding the organisation of the second edition of the International Slow Music Festival 1968, p. 156. I Brasov – Romania 1969, 25 IX 1968, p. 156.

¹¹ No other cataloguing details are available for this file, except for its title.

¹² Later it becomes the Council for Culture and Socialist Education, under the control of Nicolae Ceausescu's wife, Elena.

Journalist George Sbarcea also joined the organizing team. The festival counted 362 people on the payroll (including contestants, musicians, jury members, observers and organisers).¹³

The festival comprised of two parts: a contest section and a **recital** section (usually two recitals for each of the five days of the festivals). Singers performing in the recital section, were invited to do so for a fee of up to 3000 dollars per recital. In 1969, Juliette Gréco was paid 3000 dollars, while Cliff Richard 2500.¹⁴ Documents at the BBC archives report on several talks that Tudor Vornicu had at the BBC for obtaining Cliff Richard's participation at the festival for the fee of 18.000 dollars, which included costs for transport and personnel.¹⁵ For less costly contracts (1500-3000 roubles), the festival organizers could invite popular singers from socialist countries.

All the music stars who took part in the festival were obliged to allow at least few minutes of their recitals be filmed and broadcast on television. This footage was then reused in TVR's variety shows, which ensured the presence of international music in these domestic productions. Such variety shows featuring international stars who had performed at the music festival in Brasov enhanced TVR's presence in international programme exchanges. Valeriu Rîpeanu also recalled¹⁶ that TVR was able to exchange the footage of one festival edition for a complete Beethoven edition filmed by East German television.

The *Golden Stag* festival awarded generous prizes: 20.000 lei for the Golden Stag Trophy¹⁷ (this meant ten times the average wage of a Romanian citizen, the equivalent of five television sets or 2000 dollars on the black market). Other prizes awarded at the festival were: the Silver Stag, the Bronze Stag, and personal thanks to other notable performers. In addition there was a series of other prizes: the prize of the jury, of the Composers' Union, the Popularity Prize and the Youth Prize (the last two offered by Brasov City Hall and Brasov University).

The approximate costs of 'the edition of the festival in 1969 [were] 2.000.000 lei, plus 20.000 dollars and 4000 roubles for the invited stars.¹⁸ This edition, which sold 663 tickets, managed to bring in a profit. In the subsequent editions, it became harder and harder to obtain the government's approval for the high costs of the festival at the time when Ceausescu planned to expand Romania's economy through ambitious measures of industrialization and investment strategies.

In the 1969 edition of the *Golden Stag* festival, about 20 national television companies announced their participation. Mentioned in the order of the countries who responded, these were: France, Italy, the URSS, Belgium, Switzerland, West Germany (Bavaria), Portugal, Spain, Ireland, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, England, Scotland, Cyprus, Greece, Turkey.¹⁹ It is important to note here that the predominance of Western countries reflected Romania's favourable relations to the West, as well as the participation of other Eastern Bloc countries.

¹³ See: Order nr. 1239 for constituting the Organizing Committee for the International Festival of Pop Music in Brasov, Romania 1969, Radio Archives, Bucharest.

¹⁴ 'Cerbul de Aur' file, Romanian Radiobroadcast Society, 1969

¹⁵ See: JMG Best report, European Officer Liaison, PABX 5210-1, 26 November 1968, BBC Written Archives, Caversham, UK. Thank you to Dana Mustata for informing me of this document, which testifies the visit of Tudor Vornicu to London between 16 and 22 November 1968 in order to discuss among others (e.g. the introduction of colour television in Romania), the sale of variety programmes and the recruiting of pop stars for the *Golden Stag* festival.

¹⁶ Personal interview with Valeriu Rîpeanu, Bucharest, March 2012.

¹⁷ At the Golden Orchid festival in Bulgaria (the Bulgarian equivalent of the *Golden Stag*), the prizes were paid in the national currency of the singer's country in the 70s. (See the file The Golden Stag, 1973, the note regarding the organisation of the Vth edition of the festival, page 5, which will be refused by Cornel Burtica who replaces Paul Niculescu Mizil at the PCR Central Committee for issues of the Radiotelevision, Archives of the Radiobroadcast)

¹⁸ For the last edition of 1971 there is another positive commercial balance: 3.000.000 lei income, 2.700.000 lei revenues. Nonetheless, the cut of expenses was something normal. The economical imperatives are already heavy and the previsions for 1971 are, after the preparations in 1970, at the same level as the previous edition because of „a series of cuts” (note in the file no 269, The Golden Stag 1971, TVR archives). It's Gheorghe Maurer, prime minister until 1974 who takes care of the organisation of the fourth edition. There will be a private dispute with Ceausescu in 1971 and it's probable that probably because of his ever diminishing influence after that date the festival ended before 1990.

¹⁹ 'Cerbul de Aur' file, Romanian Radiobroadcast Society, 1969

2.4 Reactions to the Festival in France and Romania

French journalist Claude Durieux wrote in *Le Monde* on 19 March 1969 half a page dedicated to the Romanian music festival, which was included in the 1969 'Cerbul de Aur' file at the Romanian Radiobroadcast Society. The French article started with a quote given by the president of the Radiobroadcast Committee, Valeriu Pop, which spoke about Romania's attitudes to the West and the country's position in Europe and within the Soviet Bloc, primarily after Ceausescu's opposing of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968:

"We are a small country, but as consequence of our originality among the socialist demoncracies, we believe in playing a part in the relations between different countries. We love all countries, but we also need to be loved in return."²⁰

Durieux also wrote in her report on the Romanian festival:

"In this psychological climate it is clear that France and the French, general de Gaulle²¹, the sillouette of the Eiffel Tour and Barbara's songs, all mixed up together, represent a place of choice. The fact that my guide - a very refined and educated young man - was called Pompiliu clearly leaves room for jokes we can make with those who remain faithful [...] to French culture. We are happy, in these circumstances that the Festival of Brasov is, since its second year, such an accomplishment, which leaves us with nothing to envy the Eurovision contest for. (...)."²²

His article focused particularly on the enthusiasm of the Romanian audience and noted the contribution of Valeriu Lazarov, 'this J.C. Averty of Romanian television, which we discovered at the 1967 Monte Carlo festival'.²³ While the 1969 'Golden Stag' festival does not include any letters sent by viewers about the festival, it does report on letters that had been received. The 'Golden Stag' file reports that despite French culture being much honoured in Romania and celebrated properly at the *Golden Stag*, letters sent by audiences to the festival organizers expressed an anti-French attitude: 'we would like to hear some other music than French music' was mentioned in one letter.²⁴

Despite the success of the festival among its public and critics, there was a vague dissatisfaction among Romanian television audiences about the winner Luminita Dobrescu as well as about other organizing inconsistencies. Audiences criticized that Dobrescu won the festival despite being an average singer, simply because she was Romanian.

In another letter, an engineer from Bucharest wrote about the poor presentation in French at the festival: "The presentation in French was awful. Ioana Magura (n.a.: a renown presenter on Romanian television) made many mistakes in French. [She said] : "Ils ne se sont pas encore venus; Nous prions *notre* invités; arrangement *mousical*, etc. Le spectacle étant retransmis à l'étranger, je crois qu'on a été la risée de tout le monde." We made complete fools of ourselves", concluded the letter.²⁵

These critical reactions mentioned here are significant and important to take into consideration: they emphasized the superiority of the Western cultures (e.g. what was considered intolerable was to speak bad French, rather than Russian or Czeck) to Romania, whose representative unfairly won the festival. Romania's opening to the West was seen by political authorities to emphasize a complex of cultural inferiority among Romanians, which contributed to

²⁰ Claude Durieux, 'Esprit frondeur et conscience politique', *Le Monde*, March 19th 1969, p. 23, in the file "The Golden Stag 1969", Radio Archives, Bucharest.

²¹ He is the first Western president to make an official visit to Ceausescu's Romania, in May 1968.

²² Claude Durieux, 'Esprit frondeur et conscience politique', *Le Monde*, March 19th 1969, p. 23, in the file "The Golden Stag 1969", Radio Archives, Bucharest.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 'Cerbul de Aur' file, Romanian Radiobroadcast Society, 1969

²⁵ Ibid.

ending the financing of the festival in 1971.

2.5 The Golden Stag Coming to an End

Although there was no link between the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and Ceausescu's opposition to it in August 1968 on one hand and the start of the *Golden Stag* festival in May 1968 on the other, the festival was made possible in the context of Romania's opening toward the West and the country's growing independence within the Soviet Bloc. It was a context of freedom, which was also very much mirrored in television programming: consumerism was promoted by TV advertisements, lessons of foreign languages were part of morning programming on television, while the National Lottery offered prizes in the form of trips to Paris and Rome.

"The popularity of the festival among audiences emptied all the theatre halls for one week. The festival created "fashions" that made the local Romanian "trends" seem out of date. [...] This effervescence for the festival's transience was at the origin of its cancellation in 1971" said Valeriu Rîpeanu.²⁶

Carmen Dumitrescu, TVR's reporter at the festival also confessed that the *Golden Stag* constituted the only occasion for her interviews to be broadcast without censorship, because there was no time for viewing and editing the material.²⁷

All these aspects and the financial issues mentioned previously created concern for Ceausescu, who realized the unwanted turn his cultural politics were taking. Under financial pretexts, the festival was suppressed in 1971, although no explicit annulment was made about this.

The day after the 1971 edition of the festival ended, on 8 March 1971, Ceausescu created a new group who were put in charge of radio and television: the National Council for Radio and Television comprising of 78 members under the direct supervision of Dumitru Popescu (secretary of culture at the Party's Central Committee and, shortly after, Minister for Culture). This initiative on Ceausescu's part was meant to impregnate a stronger national character on Romanian television. The honouring of the French language at the festival disturbed the regime and prompted Ceausescu's regime to slowly eliminate words of foreign origins from the official Romanian vocabulary.

At the second plenary meeting of the National Council for Radio and Television, an investigation was launched to reveal the financial irregularities that occurred during the festival. Eventually, a decision was taken that the festival would take place every two years. TVR made efforts to obtain the funds for a fifth edition. However, despite the positive feedback received by the festival, especially in France, the festival was not resumed under Ceausescu's regime.

3 Conclusions

French journalist Claude Durieux' remark on the *Golden Stag* that it left nothing to envy the Eurovision Song Contest for, which I mentioned earlier on in the article clearly places this Romanian festival in the line of European music events. As illustrated in this article, the festival was endorsed by Ceausescu's regime as an attempt to place Romania and Romanian television on the European scene and stage the countries' affinities to the West.

While the Eurovision Song Contest had its debut in 1965, the *Golden Stag*, which was launched three years later was seen as a Romanian competitive alternative event to the European one.

²⁶ Personal interview with V. Rîpeanu, Bucharest, March 2012.

²⁷ Personal interview with Carmen Dumitrescu, Bucharest, March 2012

In the Soviet Bloc space, other festivals of this type took place. The most important was the Sopot Festival in Poland, which declared itself to be an alternative to the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) and was later called the *Contest of Intervision* (1977-1980), OIRT's direct equivalent of ESC.

Other festivals were being launched in the same period: *The Golden Orchid* at Varna in Bulgaria meant to attract more tourists to the socialist country; and the *Golden Lyre*, in Czechoslovakia, which took place before the Soviet invasion. These initiatives to launch music festivals in other socialist countries allowed Octavian Paler in 1967 to convince Ceausescu to launch the *Golden Stag* in 1968, and actually started before both *The Golden Orchid* and *The Golden Lyre*.²⁸ The rise and the demise of the *Golden Stag* music festival needs to be understood as part of a broader context of Romanian politics, as well as Ceausescu's foreign relations and part of a context of competition with other broadcasters and international music festivals in Europe.

Biography

Alexandru Matei has obtained his PhD in French contemporary literature at Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, Paris and University of Bucharest in 2007. He is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the [Center for Excellence in the Study of Images](#), doing research on the history of Romanian television. He published an article on Romanian television at the end of the 60s, entitled 'La Jeune télévision roumaine en fleur. 1969 ou l'année charnière' in *Télévision*, No 3, 2012, CNRS, Paris. Other publications include the volumes: *Jean Echenoz et la distance intérieure*, Harmattan, Paris, 2012 and *Ultimele zile din viata literaturii*, Cartea Romaneasca, Bucuresti, 2008. He teaches French literature and literary theory at the 'Spiru Haret' University and at the University of Bucharest.

²⁸ 'Octavian Paler a inventat Cerbul de Aur' at <http://www.ziare.com/stiri/ancheta/octavian-paler-a-inventat-cerbul-de-aur-403526> (retrieved September 30, 2012)