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Opera and nineteenth-century nation-building : the (re)sounding voice of nationalism

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Chapter Eight

Mihai Viteazul as Nation-Builder in the Romanian National Imagination

“Turning to ethnic minorities, many of whom are vertical and demotic in character and have communal *mythomoteurs*, we find that the sacred and religious factors assume even a greater importance than in dynastic ethnic states.” (Anthony D. Smith)³³⁰

“Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it *purifies* them, it makes them *innocent*, it gives them a *natural* and *eternal* justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.” (Roland Barthes)³³¹

I. Mihai Viteazul - The historical figure

Mihai Viteazul (1558-1601) was the Prince of Wallachia from 1593-1601 and for the short period 1599-1600 Prince of Moldova and Transylvania. Thus he was reigning over the territory of present day Romania. His time in power coincided with the Long or Fifteen Years' War (1593-1606), a series of battles between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. Mihai was at that time one of the wealthiest nobles in Wallachia.³³² He was raised to the throne with the help of the Sultan in 1593, but he soon turned against his patron: next year he joined the Christian alliance of European powers against the Turks, and he signed between 1592 and 1595 treaties with Zsigmond Báthory (1572-1613), Prince of Transylvania, and Aron Vodă Tiranul Prince of Moldova. He started a campaign against the Turks in the autumn of 1594. His greatest victory was at Călugăreni (near the Neajlov river) on August 13, 1595, when he defeated the Ottoman army led by Sinan Pasha. With the help of Zsigmond

³³⁰ Smith, Anthony D.: *The Ethnic Origins of Nations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1999, 109.

³³¹ Barthes, Roland: *Mythologies*, (Trans. A Lavers), London: Paladin, 1989, 156.

³³² Mihai owned 65% of all the villages in Wallachia. (See Constantiniu, Florin: *O istorie sinceră a poporului român*, București: Univers Enciclopedic, 1997, 128.)

Báthory he captured Târgoviște, Bucharest and Brăila, thus temporarily freeing Wallachia from the Ottoman rule.

In the meantime, Zsigmond Báthory resigned as Prince in favour of his cousin Cardinal András Báthory (1566-1599), the nephew of István Báthory (1533-1586), King of Poland (1571-1586). The rule of András Báthory meant that Transylvania fell under the influence of the King of Poland. In order to prevent the spreading power of the Polish King – who was also interested in Moldova³³³ – Mihai restarted negotiations with the Habsburg monarch Rudolf.

At the same time, both Zsigmond and András Báthory had to face the resistance of the Seklers, who were promised freedom during the Ottoman wars in a warrant signed by Zsigmond Báthory in 1595. András Báthory withdrew these privileges, the Seklers revolted, and joined Mihai's side instead of reinforcing Báthory's army. With their help Mihai became the ruler of Transylvania in 1599. Because Mihai refused to recognise Rudolf's rights over Transylvania, the Emperor turned against him, and sent in General Giorgio Basta to restore Habsburg rule in Transylvania. Mihai started a military campaign against Moldova and he defeated the Polish and Moldovian armies of Prince Ieremia Movilă at Bacău. This marks the brief moment when Transylvania, Moldova and Wallachia had a common ruler. (**Map 4**)

However, the momentary unification of the three principalities, which later became the founding moment for the Romanian nationalist history writers, was not induced by any ideas of nation-building or national feeling. It was the result of Mihai Viteazul's excellently manoeuvred political ambition; he recognised that Transylvania was weakening due to internal conflicts, and he reached his goal of becoming a significant power in the Habsburg-Ottoman sphere with Rudolf's help.

Mihai's success and rule over the three principalities did not last for long: after he helped Basta to defeat the army of the Hungarian nobility led by Zsigmond Báthory at Goroszló (Gurăslău), the general had Mihai assassinated on August 9, 1601, in Torda. Still, Mihai's victory against the Ottoman army, and his unification of the three principalities made him a symbolic figure of the nineteenth-century Romanians seeking for independence. Beginning with Bălcescu, Romanian nationalist historians came to regard Mihai Viteazul as the founder of modern Romania, one who forged a single unified Romanian state.

II. Representations of Mihai Viteazul in Romanian Historiography

Lucian Boia argues that in the transformations of Mihai Viteazul's figure one can trace the ideological changes in Romanian collective consciousness.³³⁴ Mihai's figure in the historiography until the nineteenth century was different from the late nineteenth-century and twentieth century portraits. Neither in the writings of the seventeenth-century chroniclers, nor in the works of the so-called Transylvanian School³³⁵ was Mihai depicted as a national icon. These narratives frequently praised the idea of Christianity, the ambitious plans of the warrior hero, and his good relationship with the Habsburg Emperor Rudolf. Nineteenth-century intellectuals relied on and elaborated on Mihai's impressive military and political ambitions and transformed them into a national narrative.

Miron Costin (1633-1691) the Moldovian humanist chronicler, who lived and studied until he was twenty in Poland, depicted Mihai as conqueror of Transylvania and Moldova, who was “the cause of much sorrow and bloodbath”, and “also hated by his fellow Wallachians, because he was the source of many wars”.³³⁶ It is understandable that Costin was not enthusiastic about Mihai, because as a Moldovian patriot with Polish affiliations, could not support one who occupied Moldova and defeated the Polish army in 1600.

Mihai's portrayal from the Wallachian side does not show any nationalistic traits either. A chronicle *Istoria domnilor Țării Românești* (The History of Wallachian

³³³ During Mihai's reign in Wallachia the Polish Chancellor Zamoiski helped to the throne Ieremia Movilă, who was Prince of Moldova in the period 1595-1600 and 1600-1606.

³³⁴ Boia, 72.

³³⁵ Școala Ardeleană (Transylvanian School) was a cultural movement founded when part of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Habsburg-ruled Transylvania accepted the leadership of the Pope and became the Greek-Catholic Church (ca.1700). The link with Rome brought to the Romanian Transylvanians the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment. The Transylvanian School's major centres were in the cities of Blaj, Oradea, Lugoj and Beiuș. Its members were the first Romanians that contemplated the origin of Romanians from a scholarly point of view, bringing historical and philological arguments in favour of the thesis that the Transylvanian Romanians were the direct descendants of the Roman colonists of Dacia after its conquest in early 2nd century AD. The Transylvanian School had a notable impact on the Romanian culture of Transylvania, as well as on the Romanians living across the Carpathians in Wallachia and Moldavia, who led the national awakening of Romania. The Transylvanian School created the current Latin-based Romanian alphabet, largely derived from the Italian and the French alphabets, which replaced the medieval Romanian Cyrillic alphabet. Another notable contribution of the Transylvanian School was the use of the first French and Italian neologisms.

³³⁶ Costin, Miron: *Opere* (ed. P.P.Panaiteescu), vol.I, București: Editura pentru Literatură, 1965, 11-24, 15-21.

Rulers), attributed to Radu Popescu and written at the end of the seventeenth century, discredited all of Mihai's adversaries: the Turks, Moldovians, Poles and Hungarians: "Mihai conquered them because they were all as stupid like an ass."³³⁷ This chronicler also mentions that Rudolf was very pleased with Mihai's triumphs and reign in Transylvania, because "the Hungarians were always against the German emperor."³³⁸ The remark illustrates, once more the *Divide et Impera* politics of the Habsburgs. They usually generated hostile feelings against the Hungarians, because they presented the greatest threat.

The representatives of the Transylvanian School, the founders of nineteenth-century Romanian nationalism, did not depict Mihai as a national hero nor did regard his political success as a symbol for a unified Romanian state. Samuil Micu (1746-1806) mentions in his *Scurtă cunoașterea a istoriei românilor* (1796) only that Mihai was a great warrior who defeated both the Turks and the Transylvanians and offered Transylvania to the Emperor Rudolf.³³⁹ Gheorge Șincai (1754-1816) dedicated in *Hronica românilor și a mai multor neamuri* (1811) a long description to Mihai Viteazul. He depicted Mihai as a hero and contrasted him with his enemies, but the political idea of a unified Romanian state does not appear in this publication. Damaschin Bojinică, a disciple of the Transylvanian School, published a biography of Mihai Viteazul under the title *Vestitele fapte și perirea lui Mihai Viteazul, prințul Țării Românești* (1830), where the main accent fell on Mihai's heroic fights against the Ottoman Empire, but he did not appear as a national hero as yet.³⁴⁰

Aaron Florian (1805-1887) embodies a turning point in the shift that changed Mihai's representation from a Christian hero and gifted politician towards a national idol. Florian was a Transylvanian historian, who studied in the 1820s in Buda and founded in 1837 the journal *Romania* that later inspired the name of the country. Between 1853 and 1856 he was the editor of the Habsburg Empire's official journal in Romanian. He depicts Mihai in his *Idee repede de istoria prințatului Țării Românești*. I–III (1835-38) as a national symbol and unifier of the country. His two hundred pages on Mihai constituted an apotheosis of the Prince. The only reproach he

³³⁷ Popescu, Radu: *Istoriile domnilor Țării Românești*, In. *Cronicile Medievale ale României IV, Istoriile Domnilor Țării Românești*, (ed. Constantin Grecescu), vol. IV, București: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, București, 1963, 1-303, section about Mihai 69-80, 80.

³³⁸ Ibid. 326.

³³⁹ *Istoria Românilor* (ed. Ioan Chindriș), vol. I, București: Editura Viitorul Românesc, 1995, 97.

³⁴⁰ Boia, 74.

made to Mihai was that in the absence of a constitution he could not keep the principalities together.³⁴¹

The Moldovan historian, Mihail Kogălniceanu (1817-1891), who had studied in Berlin and became the Prime Minister of the unified principalities of Moldova and Wallachia in 1863, did not view initially Mihai as a great Romanian unifier. He mentioned Mihai's impressive political ambition to become ruler of Transylvania in his *Histoire de la Valachie* (1837), but did not go any further than that.³⁴² However, by 1843, Mihai appeared in his opening lecture of the history course at the Academia Mihăileana in Iași, as the heroic national statesman who managed to unify the scattered lands of Dacia³⁴³.

From the late 1840s onward, Mihai's image underwent a remarkable change in Romanian historiography.³⁴⁴ He was gradually portrayed as the unifier of the "Romanian Lands" or ruler of the "old territory" of Dacia. The three great Romanian theories of history that founded the ideology of "Great Romania" merged in those decades: the theory of continuity,³⁴⁵ according to which present day Romanians are the descendants of the ancient Dacians and Romans; the theory of Romanian unity, which claims that Romanians from Transylvania, Wallachia and Moldova basically share the same national traditions; and the mythologized image of Mihai Viteazul.

Nicolae Bălcescu (1819-1852), a disciple of Florian, became the most prominent founding father of the myth about Mihai Viteazul as a national hero. He dedicated a monumental work to the memory of the Wallachian Prince, which he began in 1847

³⁴¹ Ștefănescu, Ștefan (Coord.): *Enciclopedia istoriografiei românești*, București, 1978.

³⁴² Kogălniceanu, Mihail: *Histoire de la Valachie, de la Moldavie et des Valaques transdanubiens*, In. Opere, vol. II, (Ed. Alexandru Zub), București: Editura Academiei, 1976, 177.

³⁴³ Dacia refers to a territory of Southeastern Europe that was bound by the Carpathians on the north, the Danube on the south, the Tisza river on the west and the Nistru river (now in eastern Moldova) on the east. It corresponds more or less to present day Romania and Moldova, as well as some parts of Ukraine, Hungary and Bulgaria. The capital of Dacia was Sarmisegetusa (today in Orastie Mountains in Romania). It was built in the 1st centuries BC and AD in order to protect Dacia from the Roman invasion. The Roman Empire, led by Emperor Traianus, conquered Dacia in two significant battles in 101-102 and 105-106. The capital of Roman Dacia preserved the name of Sarmisegetusa (Colonia Ulpia Traiana Augusta Dacica Sarmizegetusa) and the Romans established a military garrison on the occupied land. (See *History of Transylvania*, vol. 1, (eds. Köpeczy, Béla, Makkai, László and Mócsy, András), New York: Columbia University Press, 2001, 42-60.)

³⁴⁴ *Istoria României* (Bărbulescu-Deletant-Hitchins-Papacostea, Teodor), 297.

³⁴⁵ The Daco-Roman origin is the topic of many debates among historians. Nationalism used is a vehicle to underpin the ideology of Romanian unity. (One of the most objective approach to the Romanian continuity theory see in Boia, Lucian: *Istorie și mit în conștiința Românească*, București: Humanitas, (1997), 2006, 189-214.; in English the same book *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*, Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2001.; and *Mituri istorice românești*, (ed. Boia, Lucian), București: Ediția Universității București, 1995.)

and could not complete before his death in 1852. In this book of more than three hundred pages, *Istoria Românilor sub Mihai Vodă Viteazul*, Mihai is depicted as an unequivocal national icon, whose political actions were motivated by the thought of “national unity”. Further he argued: “the memory of a unified way of life is deeply inscribed in the consciousness of all the Romanians, which they strive to achieve again [...] this is why they hate the tyrannical Hungarians. [...] This sense of belonging together that reigned in the heart of every true Romanian explains why the Transylvanian Romanians were always ready to join forces whenever a Romanian flag was fluttering on the peaks of the Carpathian Mountains.”³⁴⁶ According to Bălcescu, Mihai Viteazul “felt strong enough to unite the Romanians in one single state and in this way to restore the ancient Kingdom of Dacia.”³⁴⁷ “The Romanian brothers united under one single fatherland” during Mihai’s reign.³⁴⁸

Bălcescu also wrote a draft for his book³⁴⁹ in which Mihai’s figure was set against the background of some kind of collective “national” consciousness of the Romanians. After a two-page introduction of philosophical pondering about God and his right to interfere when human history becomes unjust, Bălcescu traced the Romanian history from the Romanian colonists until the “barbarian Turkish burglars”. Then he enumerated the brave deeds of the various Romanian rulers of Wallachia and Moldova: he defined the Romanian striving for national independence as a fight for Christian values³⁵⁰, as well as a liberation movement against the Hungarian oppressors. Later he also included in the picture the Greeks, who were eventually hated by the Romanians because the Turks brought them to rule over them.

This was one of the first nationalistic Romanian histories, in which the Hungarians and the Turks were depicted as the archenemies of the Romanians. It is significant to note that although Bălcescu referred several times to the Saxon Germans, the third nation inhabiting Transylvania, he did not write about them as hatefully as about the Hungarians. According to Bălcescu, the Romanian common people must consider: “now that we had a successful awakening and we feel strong, we have to get back our land and our rights from which you (i.e. the Hungarians) have

³⁴⁶ Bălcescu, Nicolae: *România supt Mihai Voevod Viteazul*, in *Opere*, vol. III, (ed. Daniela Poenaru), București: Editura Academiei, 1986, 11-309; 165, 197.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 165.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 265.

³⁴⁹ Bălcescu, Nicolae: *România sub Mihai Vodă Viteazul*, In. *Opere*, București: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1952, 204-232.

³⁵⁰ He names the Romanian Land as the “Star of the Orient” (p. 215.)

robbed us; we shall reconquer our houses and estates, and we shall assassinate you all, or we shall expel you and clean the country of you.”³⁵¹ Further on, he refers to the large number of Romanian inhabitants of Transylvania, who had the right to rule “their” land purely for demographic reasons.³⁵² He includes the Transylvanian born Mathias Corvinus, the second son of János Hunyadi, among the Romanian rulers who managed to become King of Hungary.³⁵³

Another important component of Bălcescu’s rhetoric was the reference to democracy and the democratic feelings of the Romanians, as opposed to the Hungarians, who were always represented by their nobility. Bălcescu asserts: “Despotism was always foreign to the Romanians. [...]they are a very noble nation that cannot accept any other government but one that is founded by Romanians on a true Romanian national character, one that promotes the equality of the people and democracy.”³⁵⁴ Thus both important ideologies of the revolution of 1848 – democratisation and nationalism – were defined against the Hungarians, who became the icons of the “Other,” worth of hatred.³⁵⁵ Not even the Turks or the Greeks were pictured as negatively as the Hungarians.³⁵⁶

Bălcescu’s monograph about Mihai Viteazul became the first Romanian history book based on the central figure of the Wallachian Prince, who appeared here for the first time as a unifier of the Romanian Lands. Mihai accomplished the national dream of the Romanians and thus he symbolised everything that modern Romania was striving for. It was also a pioneer work in the sense that it included the history of the Moldovian and Wallachian Princes of the Middle Ages in a common national Romanian narrative. Around the time of the Romanian revolution of 1848, the Romanian history writers transformed Mihai Viteazul from a Christian warrior and

³⁵¹ Ibid. 227-228.

³⁵² Ibid 229.

³⁵³ Ibid. 213, 223.

³⁵⁴ Ibid. 215.

³⁵⁵ It is worth mentioning that it was exactly Mihai Viteazul who obliged the Romanian serfs to live and work on the land of their lord and forbade them to move freely. This is how Mihai wanted to supply manpower for his wars against the Turks. (See *Istoria Românilor* (ed. Nicoleta Dumitrescu et al), București: Humanitas Educational, 2006, 41.)

³⁵⁶ In his Chronicle *Istoriile Domnilor Țării Românești* Radu Popescu Vornicul also wrote in a hostile tone about Hungarians. When narrating about the reign of Șerban Vodă, the successor of Mihai Viteazul on the throne of Wallachia, Popescu mentions that Romanians had a widely spread saying about “the bad Hungarians”. Further, he writes that when the Romanians defeated the Hungarians with Turkish help they all thanked God for “liberating them from the Hungarians”. (See Popescu, Radu, *Istoriile domnilor Țării Românești*, In. *Cronicile Medievale ale României IV, Istoriile Domnilor Țării Românești*, (ed. Constantin Grecescu), vol. IV, București: Editura Academiei Republicii Populare Române, 1963, 82.)

hero into a national icon of the Romanian unity³⁵⁷. *Antique Dacia*, the ideological territory of the Romanian nationalists, became embodied in the figure of Mihai Viteazul.³⁵⁸

III. Mihai Viteazul and his representations in the Romanian literary and artistic conscience

Mihai Viteazul's figure appeared in the folk poems collected by Vasile Alecsandri (1821-1890), the prominent Moldovian writer who started to publish ancient Romanian folk songs in the 1840s. The volume *Poezii populare ale românilor* (Popular Poems of the Romanians) was published only in 1866. The poem about Mihai in this volume was categorised as “pseudo-folkloric”, together with the well-known Romanian text of the *Hora Unirei* (The Song of Unification).³⁵⁹ Considering its “pseudo-folkloric” nature we cannot state exactly either the age of the song, or its territorial spreading. The poem portrays Mihai as a great warrior, who managed to stop the Sultan's army. We do not know whether it actually circulated among the people and was part of the collective memory of the Romanians, or whether it was just a product of the nineteenth-century.

Gheorghe Asachi (1788-1869), a Moldovian intellectual who wrote a drama about Mihai Viteazul, studied in Lemberg, Vienna and Rome and became one of the founding fathers of Romanian literary culture and theatre. He belonged to the *prepașoptist* (pre 1848) period and cannot really be regarded as a “national” writer, because all his works were animated by Moldovian patriotism rather than nationalism or propaganda for Romanian unity. He was the founder of the first Romanian journal in Moldova, the *Albina Românească* (1829-1849) and of the Academia Mihăileana (1835), the predecessor of the University of Iași. He started theatre playing in the Romanian language (1816) and founded the Romanian Dramatic Philharmonic Society (1836).

Asachi developed as a thinker and writer in the upheaval of the “Eastern-question” in Europe, which related to the Greek revolution against Turkish occupation in 1821.

³⁵⁷ For the nineteenth-century European depictions of Mihai Viteazul see *Mihai Viteazul în Conștiința Europeană*, vol. 3 (ed. Ion Ardeleanu et al), București: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1984.

³⁵⁸ Boia, 77.

All the great European powers, the small countries under Turkish suzerainty – thus Moldova and Wallachia as well – were involved in the “Eastern-question”. The idea of the Romanian modern state began to evolve in the period between 1821 and 1848. It is not surprising that Asachi set out to write a drama about Mihai Viteazul, who managed to liberate his country from the Ottoman occupation, when the Greek liberation movements coincided with Romanian interests. Asachi’s drama, his very first historical play, was destroyed in the Iași fire of in 1827, and therefore not much is known about it.³⁶⁰ It is important to mention, however, that Asachi’s Mihai drama preceded Bălcescu’s book on him, and that Asachi was against the union of the three principalities as well as the revolutionary aims of the political movements in 1848.³⁶¹ Asachi was motivated by patriotism, but his cultural pursuits embraced no nationalistic ideologies.

Unlike Asachi, Ion Heliade Rădulescu (1802-1872), writer and linguist from Wallachia, was an ardent supporter of the Romanian revolution of 1848 and one of the first Romanian intellectuals who began to think in terms of a nation instead of a fatherland. In 1829, the year that Asachi started his *Albina Românească*, Heliade Rădulescu founded in Bucharest Wallachia’s first Romanian magazine, the *Curierul Românesc*. He was among the first “Latinizers” of the Romanian language, and he reformed Romanian orthography by opting for a simplified spelling based on the phonetic principle of his *Gramatica Românească* (1828).³⁶²

Three years earlier than Asachi in Iași, Rădulescu established in 1833 a “Philharmonic Society” in Bucharest. In order to realise “our golden dreams”, he wrote about his aims, “we have to expel Turkish music from our society.” The students of this Academy of Music performed the first theatre plays in Romanian and also the first Romanian operas.³⁶³ Heliade Rădulescu wrote the libretto of the first Romanian national opera, the *Mihai Viteazul în ajunul bătăliei de la Călugăreni* (1848), which focused on the battle of Călugăreni. The idea of unifying the

³⁵⁹ Alecsandri, Vasile: *Poezii Populare ale Românilor*, (ed. Gheorghe Vrăbie), București: Editura pentru literatură, 1966, 332, 342.

³⁶⁰ Brădăteanu, Virgil: *Drama Istorică Națională* (Perioada Clasică), București: Editura pentru literatură, 1966, 47.

³⁶¹ Adamescu, Gheorghe: *Istoria Literaturii Române*, București: Editura Librăriei Universale, 1920, 245.

³⁶² Călinescu, George: *Istoria Literaturii Române*, București: Editura pentru literatură, 1968, 62-67.

³⁶³ *Teatrul Muzical Românesc în Prima Jumătate a Secolului al XIX*, In. *Istoria muzicii românești*, Curs Universitar (eds. Brâncuși, Petre and Cosma, Octavian Lazăr), București: Universitatea din București, 1976, 110 .

principalities did not appear in this work: Heliade Rădulescu took a moderate position in 1848, and he committed himself to the conservative politics of the boyars at the end of his life.

In his synthesis about his political views, *Echilibrul între antiteze* (Equilibrium between antitheses), published between 1859 and 1869, Heliade Rădulescu argued that Romanian culture had been founded and supported by the boyars. Furthermore he maintained that the boyars could not be compared to a western aristocracy, because they were actually the progressive social class in Wallachia and Moldova. He saw that a strong government may oppress the people, but if the people are going to rule anarchy may reign. He pleaded for a balance between conservatism and progress.³⁶⁴

Another conservative thinker, writer and actor and adversary of the Romanian revolution of 1848, Constantin Halepliu (1816-1873), wrote the next drama about Mihai Viteazul: *Moartea lui Mihai Viteazul la Turda* (Mihai Viteazul's Death at Turda) published in 1854 in Bucharest. This was a historical play about the Wallachian ruler with strong patriotic overtones: "Man has to love God first, but immediately after God comes the fatherland!"³⁶⁵ It was quite naïve in the presentation of the historical events, and its relatively simple dramatic structure was imbued with a romantic spirit as well as with elements of the Sturm und Drang. Haleplius's work contributed to Mihai's patriotic image and enriched the genre of Romanian historical drama, but it did not promote any national ideas by invoking the figure of the Prince.

Dimitrie Bolintineanu (1818-1872) was the author of several literary representations of Mihai Viteazul. Three of his patriotic historical dramas had Mihai as the protagonist: *Mihai Viteazul condamnat la moarte* (Mihai Viteazul's death sentence), published in 1867, *După bătaia de la Călugăreni* (After the battle from Călugăreni) from 1868, and *Mărire și uciderea lui Mihai Viteazul* (The glory and assassination of Mihai Viteazul), published the same year. These plays were romantic depictions of the hero reminiscent of Victor Hugo's style. Romanian literary critics mostly agree that their aesthetic value is low.

Next to these dramas Bolintineanu published also some poems about Mihai Viteazul in his collection of narrative poems *Legende* (1868), which aimed at establishing a sort of national pantheon of the Romanian historical figures. One of the most frequently evoked characters, next to Ștefan cel Mare (1433-1504), was Mihai

³⁶⁴ Adamescu, 259-260.

Viteazul. Bolintineanu portrayed the Middle Ages of Moldova and Wallachia as national history. The tragic end of Mihai Viteazul called upon posterity to continue his glorious plans. However, Bolintineanu seemed to be tolerant with respect to the other nations living on the territory ruled by Mihai: “Today you give me united three crowns; / Romanians, Saxons and Hungarians I give you in exchange with all my heart / your independence back. Thus unite all / whatever your origin and blood or culture”.³⁶⁶

Mihai Viteazul inspired not only historians and writers, but painters as well. He became the favourite figure of the nineteenth-century Romanian history painter Theodor Aman (1831-1891), who created, among others, *Cea din urmă noapte a lui Mihai Viteazul* (The last night of Mihai Viteazul), dated 1852, *Unirea Principatelor* (The unification of the Principalities), from 1857, or *Izgonirea turcilor la Călugăreni* (The expulsion of the Turks at Călugăreni) from 1872.

On the Romanian operatic stage Mihai Viteazul was depicted by three composers of German origin: the mentioned Ion Andrei Wachmann composed music for Heliade Rădulescu’s drama *Mihai Viteazul* (1848). The opera’s second version was performed in January 1859, when the liberals won the elections, and Romanians voted for the unity of Wallachia and Moldova under the rule of Alexandru Cuza (1820-1873). This version was published in 1871 under the title *Monumentul de la Călugăreni* (The monument of Călugăreni).³⁶⁷ The other opera, *Moartea lui Mihai Viteazul* (Mihai Viteazul’s Death), from 1866, was composed by Karl Theodor Wagner. Julius Sulzer (?-1891), the Austrian opera composer, also set his mind to write an opera about Mihai Viteazul; he worked on it 1868-1869, but could never present it on the stage.³⁶⁸

The Romanian film director Sergiu Nicolaescu (1930 -) made in 1970 a movie called *Mihai Viteazul*, a great historical tableau divided in two parts: *The Battle of Călugăreni* and *The Unification* – two key elements of Mihai Viteazul glorification in Romania’s national consciousness. The movie was deeply imbued with the nationalism that was typical of communist Romania. Nicolae Ceaușescu (1918-1989),

³⁶⁵ Quoted in Brădăteanu, 57.

³⁶⁶ Bolintineanu, Dimitrie: *Mărirea și uciderea lui Mihai Viteazul*, București, 1868 – the passage is quoted in Brădăteanu, 68. However, Brădăteanu also mentions on the same page that this was an exceptional position, for Bolintineanu expressed in other works different opinions about the nature and implementation of national unity.

³⁶⁷ Constantinescu, Radu: *Wachmann*, București, 1975, 119.

³⁶⁸ Cosma, Octavian Lazăr: *Hronicul muzicii românești*, vol. IV, Romantismul, 1859-1898, București: Editura Muzicală, 1976, 505.

the communist dictator of Romania, was attracted to Mihai Viteazul's figure, because he saw Mihai as a believer and realizer of the *eternal great Romania*, which Ceausescu tried to embody. Thus Mihai Viteazul was also used as propaganda material by the Ceaușescu regime.³⁶⁹

IV. Mihai Viteazul on the Romanian operatic stage

IV. 1 Romanian operatic practice in a historical perspective

Initially, operas were presented to Romanian audience by travelling Italian opera companies, which gave performances in Transylvania and occasionally also visited Bucharest and Iași. The opera flourished mainly in the German (Saxon) Transylvanian cities like, Brassó (Brașov, Kronstadt), Szeben (Sibiu, Hermannstadt) and Temesvár (Timișoara, Temeschburg or Temeschwar). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Italian and German opera companies temporarily settled in these cities and regularly performed the masterpieces of the European opera repertoire. There was, as noted earlier, a permanent Hungarian theatre and opera company in Kolozsvár (Cluj, Klausenburg). In 1772 the opera company of the Italian Livio Cinti travelled from Szeben to Wallachia and Moldova. This is the earliest date concerning opera performances in the Romanian lands.³⁷⁰ In 1815 a German company directed by Johann Gerger performed a theatre piece by Kotzebue in Romanian in order to attract more public. After touring in the major Transylvanian cities, this company visited Bucharest in 1818 and performed two operas by Mozart, the *Idomeneo* and the *Magic Flute*, and several operas by Rossini. Though Bucharest had no permanent theatre or opera as yet, the audience was up-to-date with the latest European operas thanks to the foreign travelling companies. For example Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, first performed in 1816 in Rome, had its first night in 1819 in Paris and in 1821 in Bucharest.³⁷¹ Theodor Müller's company, which was called *Die Bukarester Operngesellschaft* and later settled in Brassó (Brașov, Kronstadt),³⁷² had the most decisive impact on the development of Romanian opera practice in the 1830s. Johann

³⁶⁹ Boia, 356.

³⁷⁰ Cosma, Octavian Lazăr: *Hronicul muzicii românești 1784-1823*, vol. II, București: Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, 1974, 152.

³⁷¹ Ibid. 179.

Andreas Wachmann, composer of *Mihai Bravul în ajunul bătăliei de la Călugăreni* (1848), was the conductor of Müller's orchestra. The company performed sixty operas in 1833-1834 in Bucharest. After the success of *Die Bukarester Operngesellschaft* and performances by some French strolling actors, a permanent Italian opera company was established in 1843 in Bucharest, and the educated public came to favour thus Italian style operas.

A French opera company that opened a theatre in Iași in 1832 performed mostly vaudevilles. Their repertory consisted of plays enriched with instrumental and vocal musical parts inspired by the local culture. The comedies focused on the autochthonous life and everyday reality. But local history also appeared on the stage in these pieces. One of the first examples of such a historical tableau was the *Dragoș, întâiul domn suveran al Moldovei* (Dragoș, the first sovereign ruler of Moldova) a 1834 co-production of Gheorghe Asachi, who wrote the texts, and his wife, Elena, who set it to music. This was followed by other historical pieces like *Serbarea militară* (Military celebration) in 1834, *Serbarea păstorilor moldoveni* (The celebration of the Moldovan shepherds) also from the same year, in which the renowned Romanian actor Matei Millo (1814-1896) also sang a role.³⁷³ In 1846, a National Theatre was opened in Iași with mostly actors of Romanian origin. Their success was due to the music they included in the different plays. Opera, or musical drama, became more and more popular among the Romanians. The composers often used folk tunes and the *lăutar* music in their works to attract a larger audience. The satires of the vaudevilles often contained strong social criticism. Their musical style ranged from folk songs to oriental music, and from salon dances to romance (Romanze, Romanza), a simple sentimental genre for solo instrument and voice. The theatre companies that performed the very successful and popular vaudevilles could compete with the foreign opera companies, which performed Western opera music for a smaller but more educated audience. The artists of the pre-1848 reformers gave a great impetus to Romanian theatre life. The theatre companies of C. Halepliu, Matei Millo and C. Caragiale-I.A. Wachmann played Romanian operas and plays all over Wallachia and Moldova. In the 1850s and 1860s, Vasile Alecsandri became one of the most ardent supporters of vaudevilles because he recognised that Romanian literary

³⁷² Cosma, Octavian Lazăr: *Hronicul muzicii românești*, vol. III, București: Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor, 1975, 234.

texts could reach through their music a wider audience. Alecsandri remarked in a letter of 1881: “I became a poet in the eyes of the Romanians only the day that my verses were set to music by Flechtenmacher.”³⁷⁴

Next to the vaudeville two other dramatic genres were popular in that time: the puppet theatre and the village wedding scenes.³⁷⁵ The puppet theatre was the favourite genre of the village and town fairs. This mostly satirical genre was directed at the lower social strata, expressing and representing their world-view and social criticism. The first Romanian public theatre plays were mixtures of puppet theatre and salon theatre.³⁷⁶ Folk musicians, the *lăutari*, always accompanied these performances, creating thereby an atmosphere with their songs. The village wedding scenes re-enacted scenes from the rich folk traditions associated with Romanian weddings. The vaudevilles later integrated these two genres and contained from six to twelve musical numbers, mostly duets.

The precursor of the Romanian national opera was arguably the vaudeville. Its satirical libretti reacted to Romanian social life, and the music was based on local folk traditions consisting mainly of well-known popular songs and dances. The performances often ended with the *hora* dance, which was regarded as a typical Romanian folk genre. No wonder then that Alexandru Flechtenmacher (1820-1898), the most important Romanian vaudeville composer, was also the author of the *Hora Unirii* (The hora of Unity), a song that has almost the same status as the official Romanian national anthem. The marches, waltzes and serenades included in the vaudevilles created an atmosphere for the actions. Their dramatic function was to intensify the emotions expressed in the plays. Though these vaudevilles were not through-composed operas, they paved the way for Romanian operas.

³⁷³ Tulvan, Ghizela: *Scurtă istorie comparată a muzicii maghiare și românești în context istoric și european*, București: Arvin Press, 2007, 71.

³⁷⁴ Cosma, Octavian Lazăr: *Opera Românească. Privire istorică asupra creației lirico-dramatice*, București: Editura Muzicală, 1962, 68.

³⁷⁵ *Teatrul Muzical Românesc în prima jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea*, 113.

³⁷⁶ Mîndra, V.: *Istoria literaturii dramatice românești*, vol I, De la începuturi pînă la 1890, București: Minerva, 1985, 85.

IV. 2 Operatic variations on Mihai Viteazul

Ion Andrei Wachmann, composer of the first Romanian opera, an originally ethnic German composer, was born in Budapest in 1807 and came to Brassó (Braşov, Kronstadt) with Austrian troupes in the mid-1830s. He became a choir and orchestra conductor first in Temeschwar (1831-1833) and later in Bucharest (1833-1835), teacher at the Philharmonic Society in Bucharest (1835-1836) and at the St. Sava College (1846-1850), the conductor of Costache Caragiale's (1818-1877) theatre company (1850-1858), later conductor at the National Theatre in Bucharest (1852-1856) and towards the end of his life at the National Theatre in Craiova (1858-1860). Wachmann collected and published Romanian folk songs, and he adopted them in his own works.³⁷⁷

In 1848, Wachmann composed the opera *Mihai Bravul* that consists of three major tableaux. The first one is a monologue of Mihai's, written in the form of an aria occasionally mixed with recitatives, which evokes the glorious past and the bravery of his people:

“Dear Romania, Rome's daughter!

You have endured for centuries the fights against the barbarian hordes,

and you have saved Europe from so much evil coming from the East. [...]

Your martyr blood you have shed for the honour of the Cross.”³⁷⁸

(Example 5)

In the second section Mihai prays to God to keep the country safe from the heathens. Subsequently he talks to Captain Buzescu and tries to lift the spirit of the soldiers with an oration: “The heathen will quiver because the Romanians bring his end.”³⁷⁹ In the third section Mihai encourages the people to go and fight the Turks, who answer him with enthusiastic cheers. The chorus responds: “Let the blood of the hated enemy flow in rivers.”³⁸⁰ Wachmann's music imitates Italian opera style and does not use anything specifically “Romanian” or “national”. However, in the second

³⁷⁷ *Muzicieni Români*, Lexicon, (ed. Viorel Cosma), Bucureşti: Editura Muzicală, 1970, 462.

³⁷⁸ *Michaiu în ajunul bătăliei de la Călugăreni*, Bucureşti: Tipografia lui Eliade, Jan. 19, 1848, 1 (to be found in the Biblioteca Academiei Romane, cota I. 17895) .

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 3.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 5.

version, performed in 1859, he included in the orchestral part some melodies resembling the hora, and to create *couleur locale* he used the major second.³⁸¹

Mihai Bravul consists of only three numbers and can hardly be called an opera. Compared to operas in Western Europe it was insignificant, but it had a remarkable function within the development of Romanian music and the representation of a national consciousness on the stage. One can recognise in it the vaudeville style with its historical topic, its emphasis on emotions and its tableau like structure. The heroes of the vaudevilles were always simple people, representatives of the folk; the boyars, who imitated foreign traditions, be they Western or Eastern, were mocked at. Elevated to the status of a hero in a vaudeville-like musical drama, Mihai may have been regarded by the contemporary audience as “one of us”, as someone belonging to the folk. Of course, this representation of Mihai contradicted the historical personality who was, as mentioned earlier, one of the richest boyars in Wallachia. Mihai, actually a proud and ambitious autocratic ruler, could become an icon of a national democratic movement through his nineteenth-century representations.

It is a pity that no newspaper articles or reviews have been found about the opera’s reception. Mihai was obviously of great interest to Wachmann: his manuscripts also contain fragments with titles as *Ban Crajovi* (Mihai was the governor of Craiova at the beginning of his career), *Umbra lui Mihai Viteazul* (The Shadow of Mihai Viteazul), and *Moartea lui Mihai Viteazul* (The Death of Mihai Viteazul).³⁸²

As mentioned, two other composers also wanted to write operas about the Wallachian Prince. The protagonist of Karl Theodor Wagner’s *Moartea lui Mihai Viteazul* is not only Mihai but also a crowd of peasants and soldiers. Mihai’s character is more complex than in Wachmann’s opera: he appears as a merciless warrior.³⁸³ According to the Romanian music historian, Octavian Lazăr Cosma, the Romanian state commissioned the writer Iosif Vulcan (1841-1907) to write a musical drama in Romanian for the Italian theatre company of Bucharest, but since Sulzer’s opera was in Italian and not in Romanian, his work was never presented. Reading the libretto, we may explain differently why Sulzer’s work was not performed in Bucharest.³⁸⁴ Sulzer came to Bucharest to become the conductor of the Italian opera company

³⁸¹ Cosma, *Hronicul muzicii românești*, vol III, 312-313.

³⁸² Cosma, *Hronicul muzicii românești*, vol III, 312.

³⁸³ Cosma, *Hronicul muzicii românești*, vol IV, 504.

around 1867, the year of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise. The Romanian state encouraged composers to write Romanian national operas. Sulzer wanted to compose “un opéra national Roumain”³⁸⁵ and chose the historical moment of Mihai Viteazul’s unification of the three principalities. However, Sulzer’s Mihai is not a hero, and he is not celebrated as a national hero. This Mihai is a harsh, brutal warrior, who makes a bloodbath in Transylvania by occupying it. His daughter Florica is ashamed of his father’s cruel deeds, and she falls in love with a Hungarian, which complicates the situation. In the end, Mihai recognises his brutality and asks for his daughter’s forgiveness. A work that focused on the sufferings of the Hungarians in Transylvania and depicted the Romanian hero as a bloodthirsty warlord, opposed, of course, the ideas of the commissioning Romanian government. Sulzer depicted nationalism as something wrong, that does not serve humanity. His opera was never performed. It could not be accepted by an age blinded by nationalism.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid. 505.