

Conversations with Pianist and Professor Gabriel Amiras
The Role of the Performer in Deciphering, Understanding and Revealing the
Content of the Musical Score
A Portrait through Dialogue



GRIGORE CONSTANTINESCU

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A Portrait through Dialog**

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GABRIEL AMIRAS
 GABRIEL AMIRAS

"OMAGIU"

Invers

Marius Suciin

*Musical anagram: Gabriel Amiras by composer Marius Suciin.



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PREFACE

Performance in practice and theory:

Gabriel Amiras

In recent decades, many studies and volumes have appeared on the subject of music interpretation – inspired also by the orientation towards historically informed performance – and the questions in them flow unabated: How should a score be played “stylistically correct”? How does one decipher the composer’s intentions and manage to remain faithful to them? How does one achieve “authenticity” or “authenticities” (as Peter Kivy would put it)?

Published in 2016 by Editura Muzicală in Bucharest (*De vorbă cu pianistul și profesorul Gabriel Amiras*), this book of dialogues takes up such questioning avenues and proposes many other topics, with the intelligence, charm and passion that have always characterised the piano playing and pedagogical art of Amiras. This “portrait in dialogue” becomes an unconventional treatise on the art of piano playing, on musical performance in general, with discreet and thought-provoking contrapuntal interventions by Grigore Constantinescu, who stimulated the discussion and got to the heart of it, and who is unfortunately no longer with us to see the English version of the book.

After studying in Cluj, Bucharest, and then with the famous Heinrich Neuhaus in Moscow, Gabriel Amiras built a solo and teaching career in Romania and has settled in Germany for the last

three decades, where his courses in Trossingen attracted a steady student body. That was a statement that rather belongs in an encyclopedia, with which I only want to point out that the musician's thinking combines influences, ideas and techniques from very different worlds (East and West) and eras (communist and post-communist). Amiras decides decisively where his admiration goes (Sergiu Celibidache undoubtedly occupies a top place), he also has rich theoretical references (philosophical, semiotic or rhetorical), which he always shapes for practical purposes when working in front of the keyboard. In his extensive contributions in this volume – each becoming a concentrated essay on a particular topic – he covers a wide spectrum, from advocating the analytical, intellectual, highly trained performer in front of the score to explaining inspiration and emotion. The configuration of the ideal performer is specified by his knowledge of reading the score: “motif, phrase, form, tonality, register, rhythm, tempo, agogic and others – all need to be analyzed in order to decode, and finally translate the content, the character, *the meaning* and the message of the given musical work” (see chapter *On musical thinking...*). On stage, the same ideal performer should be aware of the parallelism between “the intense experience of the emotional content with all its stages and elements, and the lucid control through willpower and power of concentration over the details through which the message, the narrative and dramatism of the piece are expressed and transmitted” (see chapter *The artist on stage*).

What I find extremely important in the ideas of Gabriel Amiras, and what should be exemplary for the Romanian school (and not only for the pianists), is his lack of rigidity in the system of performance and pedagogy. The misunderstood and reproduced notion of “style”, often dogmatized, leads to a pale and monotonous playing of Bach or to liberties beyond the limits of good taste in the romantic repertoire. As a reader, I agree with him, for example, when he says that there is no universal Bachian performance style that can be imposed on every master class. On the other hand, I discover passages that I am happy to

endorse, about the composer's vision and creative process, about the performer and his roles, about the timbre of the "orchestral" piano, about the pianist's technical exercises applied to passages in the scores, about the wide repertoire choices covering the composer's past and present, and much more.

In addition to all these considerations, which apply to every performer and are made concrete for pianists in certain chapters, the book of dialogues between Gabriel Amiras and Grigore Constantinescu also becomes a testimony to the historical, artistic and ideological context of the last seven decades. The clear and inspiring memories of Moscow and Heinrich Neuhaus, Sviatoslav Richter or David Oistrach, of Romanian and international musicians trace Amiras's soulful journey through his time. In precise strokes, sometimes admiring, sometimes critical, he recalls Sergiu Celibidache, Igor Markevitch and Karl Böhm, Gheorghe Halmos, Sigismund Toduță, Florica Musicescu and Constantin Silvestri, among others, Glenn Gould, Arthur Rubinstein, Lazar Berman, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Daniel Barenboim, Alfred Brendel, Grigory Sokolov and Arkadi Volodos (the last two – Amiras's favourite pianists).

The conversations between Grigore Constantinescu and Gabriel Amiras thus become an informal dissertation on pianism, spiced with reminiscences, over which the passion for the music of a musically reflective performer and professor, but also the empathy of a musicologist for performance, sovereignly hovers.

*Valentina Sandu-Dediu
Bucharest, February 2023*



CURRICULUM VITAE*

Professor and Concert Pianist Gabriel Amiras was born in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. He had a prodigious career as Professor of Piano at the Music Academies of Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, Romania, between 1961 and 1993, Guest Professor at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris, France and Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst in Graz, Austria. In 1993, Gabriel Amiras moved to Germany where he held until retirement the position of University Professor C4 at Staatliche Hochschule für Musik in Trossingen (position previously held by pianist and professor Viktor Merzhanov from Moscow). In parallel with his pedagogical activity, Gabriel Amiras maintained a busy career as concert pianist on many stages in his home country and abroad.

Gabriel Amiras began the study of the piano at the age of five under the guidance of his mother, piano teacher Palma Amiras. His artistic development continued with:

- Studies and graduation of the High School of Music in Cluj-Napoca, followed by one year at the Music Conservatory of Cluj-Napoca under the guidance of professor and pianist Gheorghe Halmos;
- Graduate and post-graduate (aspirantura, mastery) piano studies at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory of Moscow (between

* based on Lehrerverzeichnis der Staatlichen Hochschule für Musik, Trossingen, Germany

1955 and 1961), completed with *summa cum laude* at the piano class of legendary professor Heinrich Neuhaus, PhD, as well as Mark Millman (Chamber Music) and Yuri Keldysh (History of Music) among others;

- Two years of post-graduate studies with professor Florica Musicescu (Bucharest);
- Masterclasses for concert pianists held in Vienna within the Wiener Festwochen in 1967, 1968, and 1969, under the guidance of Alfred Brendel, Paul Badura-Skoda and Jörg Demus, awarded with the 1st Prize;
- Private studies with Alfred Brendel (Vienna);
- Masterclasses with Arthur Rubinstein (at Fontainebleau), Nadia Boulanger and Yvonne Lefébure (in Paris).

In recommendation letters and character references, famous pianists of the time such as Arthur Rubinstein, Alfred Brendel and others predicted a successful concert pianist career for the young Gabriel Amiras. His performances earned him titles of laureate of the national and international competitions and festivals in Berlin, Bucharest, Vienna, Warsaw and Prague.

His debut as soloist with orchestra was made with the Piano Concerto in A minor by Hummel, performed in several cities of Romania under the baton of conductors Antonin Ciolan, Egizio Massini, Constantin Bobescu, Mircea Popa, Henry Selbing and others.

Besides acquiring a complete artistic formation, the years of musical studies in Moscow as well as the awards, and the undeniable recognition by great pianists of the time, paved the way for numerous tours sustained by Gabriel Amiras in leading cultural centers of Europe and Central America, while providing the opportunity to promote Romanian culture abroad. Among those tours, his recitals in Vienna between 1967 and 1971 earned the young pianist the highest ratings and the praise of musical critics.

In the following years, Gabriel Amiras performed on various stages in Austria, Germany (both in the former Federal and the Democratic Republics), Switzerland, France, Italy, Spain, Cuba, as well as in all the former Eastern European block countries – from the USSR to Yugoslavia – making also numerous recordings for radio and television studios in Berlin, Basel, Berne, Zurich, Munich, Hanover, Nürnberg, Stuttgart, Vienna, Warsaw, Moscow, Leningrad (St Petersburg) and other cities.

Shortly after returning from his studies in Moscow, Gabriel Amiras started his pedagogical career concurrently with his concert pianist activity, becoming after more than forty-five years of teaching one of the most prominent professors at the Music Academies of Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest. He created a *piano school* that bears his signature, which besides the knowledge acquired from his great Maestros is characterized by perfecting the sound production through a technique of touch that complements the piano registers, in keeping with the principles of orchestrating the instrument described by Liszt. This school fosters direct interaction between the palette of sound colors and the other parameters of the music: harmony, rhythm, tempo, and finally, phrasing and character.

Among his most prominent former students and disciples in Romania are Dana Borșan, Viniciu Moroianu, Luiza Borac, Remus Manoleanu, Andrei Deleanu, Cristian Beldi, Adriana Bera, Sorin Dogariu, Ștefan Agoșton, Lena Vieru, Florin Farcaș, and others.

After moving to Germany, Gabriel Amiras continued to develop numerous concert pianists and teachers within his Masterclass, who became soloists and professors in Hague, Stuttgart, Hanover, Basel, Zurich, Paris, Stockholm, as well as in Kharkiv, Kiev (or Kyiv), St Petersburg, Shanghai, Seoul, and Tokyo.

During the more than fifty years of concert activity, Gabriel Amiras has been a regular guest soloist of the George Enescu Philharmonic, the Romanian Radio-Television Orchestra of Bucharest, and of all the other

philharmonic orchestras in Romania. He also performed numerous piano recitals in Bucharest and across the country, and formed various chamber music ensembles, among which the Chamber Music Ensemble of the Radio Broadcasting Service of Cluj-Napoca, the duo with violinist Cornelia Bronzetti, the piano quintet and the piano trio of Trossingen.

Separate from the concert activity, Gabriel Amiras made numerous recordings for the Romanian Radio-Television, and for the Romanian record label Electrecord.

The following are his reference live and radio recordings:

Solo Piano

- Beethoven – Piano Sonatas Op. 109, Op. 110, Op. 111;
- Ravel – the cycles *Gaspard de la nuit*, *Miroirs*;
- Brahms – Piano Sonata No. 3 for Cello and Piano in E minor, Op. 5; Variations on an Original Theme;
- Schumann – Piano Sonatas Op. 11 and Op. 22; *Symphonic Studies*, Op. 13;
- Debussy – *Estampes*, *Images I and II*;
- Prokofiev – Piano Sonata No. 2;
- Bartók – Piano Sonata (1926);
- Enescu – Piano Sonata No. 1 in F # minor.

Piano and Orchestra

- Hummel – Piano Concerto in F minor;
- Mozart – Piano Concerto No. 23 in F Major, K. 488;
- Beethoven – Piano Concerto No. 1 in C Major, Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Piano Concerto No. 5 in E b Major, *Emperor*;
- Brahms – Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor;
- Schumann – Piano Concerto in A minor;
- Liszt – *Danse Macabre*, Piano Concerto No. 1 in E b Major, Piano Concerto No. 2 in A Major;

- Ravel – Piano Concerto in G Major;
- Prokofiev – Piano Concerto No. 3;
- Bartók – Piano Concerto No. 3;
- Honegger – Concertino for Piano and Orchestra;
- Țăranu – Concerto for Piano;
- Constantinescu – Concerto for Piano and Orchestra.

Chamber Music

- Beethoven – The complete cycle of sonatas for piano and violin;
- Brahms – The complete cycle of sonatas for piano and violin, the complete cycle of sonatas for cello and piano, the Piano Quintet;
- Schubert – Piano Quintet *The Trout (Forellen Quintett)*;
- Dvořák – Piano Quintet;
- Bartók – Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion;
- Odăgescu – Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion.

Gabriel Amiras collaborated with great Romanian conductors and with famous international representatives of the art of conducting, such as Hans Swarowsky, Edgar Tons, Klaus Pringsheim, Kurt Adler, Brian Brockless, Edgard Doneux, Gilbert Varga, Michiyoshi Inoue, Jacques Pernoo, Oleg Markevich, and others.

More recently, after moving to Germany, performances of demanding piano works such as Prokofiev – Piano Concerto No. 3, Bartók – Piano Concerto No. 3, Beethoven – Piano Concerto No. 5, Brahms – Piano Concerto in D minor earned him new invitations to perform in Romania, renewing his collaboration with the National Radio-Television Orchestra, the National University of Music in Bucharest, the Philharmonic Orchestras of Oradea, Arad, Satu-Mare, Bacău, and other cities. Gabriel Amiras was also invited to hold masterclasses, and to be jury member in the national competitions in Piatra-Neamț, Constanța, Galați.

Along with the vast repertoire including essential works of the universal piano literature, Gabriel Amiras promoted Romanian music to the same extent, performing first-audition works by Sigismund Toduță, Cornel Țăranu, Vasile Herman, Alexandru Hrisanide, Costin Miereanu, Adrian Rațiu, Dan Constantinescu, Corneliu Rădulescu, Irina Odăgescu, Ede Terényi, and others, both in Romania and abroad.

Gabriel Amiras was a jury member for the Ferruccio Busoni (Bolzano), George Enescu (Bucharest), Vladimir Horowitz (Kharkiv), and Sergei Rachmaninoff (Moscow) International Competitions. He repeatedly held masterclasses in Rome at the Heinrich Neuhaus Foundation, as well as in Graz, Paris, Stuttgart, Weimar. He earned the wide appreciation of the young generation attending classes held within the music festivals in Arad (1999, 2000), Piatra-Neamț (2006), Bucharest (2010, 2011).

Gabriel Amiras has been included in the following lexicons:

- *Men of Achievement* (starting from 1986, including the anniversary editions), the UK;
- *Kürschners Musiker-Handbuch* (5th edition, editor Axel Schniederjürgen, K. G. Saur, München, 2006, p. 9), the musical lexicon of contemporary musicians in the German cultural space;
- *Performers in Romania* (by Viorel Cosma, editors Radu and Mircea Constantinescu, Galaxia Publishing, Bucharest, 1996, p. 20-21), the musical lexicon of performers in the cultural space of Romania;
- *Who is who in the World* (starting from 1982), the USA.

BOOK 1



THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK. MOTIVATIONS, PROJECTS

Over the years, countless studies and thorough analyses have been written about the practical and theoretical aspects of *the art of interpretation*¹ – sometimes included in encyclopedic works – enlarging on a wide range of topics, from the mechanics of movement and the effects of human anatomy and physiology to the philosophical concepts and elements of psychology that account for the feelings and emotions expressed through music. These works contain the theories and principles developed by giants of the human thought from Aristotle to Darwin and Freud, from the creators of the Gregorian *cantus firmus* to Messiaen, Stockhausen, Xenakis, Hans Werner Henze and such...

In this illustrious landscape that can be intimidating for any new contributor, the present book tries to address certain aspects of the art of interpretation that I was unable to find references about in the

¹ Throughout the text of this book I have opted to use the term *performer* when referring to the pianist, the musician-interpreter, as in the context of music the word *performer* also implies the creative and artistically important process of musical interpretation of the score. I found this to be the best match for the term *interpret* used in the original text in Romanian, which means both performer and interpreter, adding the dimension of interpreting the meaning of the music to that of playing the music – an interpretation through performance. These points are further elaborated in the text at hand and the contents of this note serve to clarify any possible confusions regarding the term (translator's note).

specialized literature, and which I consider to be important for the professional performer.

The ideas discussed in this book – bearing influences from certain schools, methods and philosophical movements, such as semiotics and phenomenology – represent my own personal views on the part, the calling and *the mission of the performer* in deciphering, decoding, understanding the musical writing, and in conveying its essence through talent, imagination, artistry, and erudition. These ideas are based on my experience as performer, and teacher, spanning over more than six decades of activity, under all imaginable circumstances created by the struggles of a life marked deeply by the ups and downs of history.

This book does not attempt to be an advanced study written by a musicologist for musicologists or experts in music theory, rather it is a book written by a performer for other performers and is addressed to those who go to great length to understand and perhaps reconsider certain aspects related to the art of interpretation.

The main postulation I propose is the *translatability* of the musical “text” (speaking metaphorically), in that the emotional content inherent to the details of the structure and the narrative of the composition can be revealed and can be expressed. I always advocated this postulation to my students, and we will debate it extensively in our dialogue.

The concept that the emotional content can be understood is closely related to a field of *semiotics* dedicated to identifying the meaning of the elements and the syntax of the musical score. I feel however far from formulating postulations documented with a long bibliography, quotations or references to other authors’ works – as in a doctoral paper. Rather, besides the obvious desire of “imparting” at the end of a lifelong journey, the purpose of this book is to express my thinking, and to describe deeply personal experiences with the intent of provoking thoughts, ideas and dialogues in the reader’s mind.

This overture sounds as enticing as can be! Is it by any means a statement of intent, calling forth ideas to keep watch over the long hours of conversation?

Absolutely! I am perfectly aware of the adventure I am embarking on by putting forth my ideas on issues debated over and over again by many authors throughout time.

Personally, I consider myself to represent neither a school, nor any famous personality that I had the great fortune to learn from. I only represent myself, hopefully embracing my true self! The apparent “rebellions” against canonic rules expressed throughout our dialogue are the result of accumulating answers to countless questions asked throughout a life punctuated by “challenges of fate” – events and trials that clouded my journey, often dispiriting me through the frustrations they brought about, and from which at times it was difficult to recover. These trials have often hindered, but have also inspired my honest and ambitious efforts to find the truth, motivated by a relentless thirst for the new – truth that once found, I defended and stood by with a tenacity that sometimes, I must admit, was not entirely diplomatic...

Not a simple project that would be easy to complete. I have never thought of you as willing to admit compromises, to give in to vindictive attitudes or imposed orders. I am referring not only to the interactions in the academic world, where, as we know, you have surpassed powerful conflicts, but also to the way you manifest your temperament on stage, in the not so conventional dialogue with the conductor.

This is the very reason why I compared our project to an adventure. In my mind I carry many thoughts and ideas, taking the form of *freie Philosophierungen* – if you want, uncatalogued ideas – on the issue that we, professional performers, have always concerned ourselves with: the approach towards the written Music and the Art of Interpretation as a “translator” of the *sacred* musical score, by making use of our own vision, with the help of our talent, erudition, means

of expression, and, of course the capacity to understand the message, its meaning and its content! I do not have a precise layout for organizing the subjects – just a large quantity of thoughts that I have never expressed in writing. This is why we both decided on the format and the principle of a dialogue between two professional musicians.

I must admit, on several occasions I intended to start working on a book, I even tried to effectively collaborate with writers and musicologists in several countries, but clearly “something” was missing from those initiatives, since they always failed. The collaboration with you has finally offered the ideal platform to carry out this project – and picking the form of dialogue was instrumental.

It is true that by the method of dialogue – which implies questions meant to challenge, to which the interlocutor attempts to formulate adequate answers – it may be harder to expound on some subjects in a consistent and definitive/decisive way. Also, the formula of the dialogue rules out a chronological ordering and an exhaustive treating of the issues that are discussed, as the flow of conversation can be at times interrupted by questions that may be confusing, or which redirect the conversation, encumbering the desired course of the thematic. As result, it will be hard not to reiterate some “clarifications” amidst the array of ever topical and controversial issues that we will discuss, while other issues will be resumed in several other chapters. For this reason, the titles of the chapters in this book are approximate – indicative only of the range of topics that are covered, without the aim of exhausting them in the respective chapter.

On the other hand, a dialogue structure will eliminate *ab ovo* all the impediments arising from the process of writing an essay or a theoretical monography that takes automatically the shape of a monologue – such as the difficulty of expressing oneself, the strained formulations, the lack of spontaneity or other reservations...

Initially, I had planned to collaborate with a third person to enlarge the thematic area of our discussion, and to make the dialogue

more vivid. In the meanwhile, I laid hands on Lavinia Coman's book: *Modern Piano Playing* – a superior theory of the art of piano playing, written by a pre-eminent pianist and musicologist. I admit that browsing through various chapters, reading through it, and dwelling particularly on her concluding statements, I suddenly felt extremely discouraged and inhibited in my endeavor to formulate professional principles related to my own line of work. Compared to Lavinia Coman's comprehensive scientific and scholarly documentation, the free spontaneous dialogue in our book is very much in contrast, as it is written with the sole purpose of expressing (as it results from the title) a musical performer's thoughts and experience – without the desire to lay down undisputable rules and postulations meant to last forever.

I have thus come to realize that in order to faithfully bring my principles to life, there is no better format than a dialogue between two, the two of us.

Our dialogue is born out of the desire for all these lifelong quests to somehow find a formulation that represents the personal mark of your life on music. Better said, the mark of the person that you are, not just somebody who was content to take knowledge from somebody else and pass it on as such, like a telephone game, but someone who formed his own opinion about thinking as a musical performer and as a teacher.

I kept thinking as you were talking, that as musical performer you had your own personal opinions and what you had to say was not always understood as you would have liked to, and then I recalled, on the scale of time, your concerts from beautiful old times, the concerts on the stage of the Romanian Atheneum that were always important events... You know, I still remember the Liszt, the Danse Macabre, of which at the time I did not know much and could not imagine it to be so terribly difficult, impressing and wildly demanding on the musical performer. That is because first and foremost, there was music in it – and agreed, Liszt is an overwhelming personality, a visionary, and at the same time someone

with unusually deep feelings – but what you did then with Danse Macabre I could not forget, just as I cannot forget many other works that you played, such as Beethoven’s last piano sonatas.

Nevertheless, the piano is the main subject for engaging our conversation, this dialogue guided by the pathway to the two dimensions that I am interested in:

- *the Creator – Performing Artist;*
- *the Creator – Teacher and Professor.*

Gabriel Amiras represented both with great distinction throughout his long career.

Now, let us take the first step further from mere intentions, and proceed with the peaceful debate of the topics that we proposed...