

EUROVISION SONG CONTEST: HISTORY AND CONTEMPORANEITY**CONCURSUL DE CÂNTEC EUROVISION: ISTORIE ȘI CONTEMPORANEITATE****VICTORIA TCACENCO,**Ph.D. in the History of Arts, Associate Professor,
Academy of Music, Theatre and Fine Arts

The present article analyses the Eurovision Song Contest's history including the evolution of the Republic of Moldova's participation in this important event from both points of view, that is, the cultural and political ones. The author studies the most significant hits which have been a success in this contest, observing not only positive dynamics in Moldovan pop music development, but also the challenges for local artists and composers that appeared in the last years, being connected with broadening of European composers' and singers' participation within the national selection procedure. The most valuable hits, created by local artists, have been analyzed. Another dilemma is treat all in the connected with the composers' and public's attitude towards the national folklore influences integrated in poetic and musical texts of songs, presented within the Eurovision.

Keywords: Eurovision, pop music, song, hit, national folklore

Acest articol analizează istoria concursului de cântec Eurovision, inclusiv evoluția participării Republicii Moldova la acest eveniment important atât cultural cât și politic. Autoarea studiază cele mai semnificative hituri care au avut succes în acest concurs, observând nu doar dinamica pozitivă în dezvoltarea muzicii pop din Moldova, dar și unele provocări pentru artiștii și compozitorii locali, apărute în ultimii ani, fiind legate de lărgirea participării compozitorilor și interpreților europeni la preselecția națională. Cele mai valoroase hituri create de artiștii locali au fost de asemenea analizate. O altă dilemă tratată în cadrul articolului în cauză este legată de atitudinea compozitorilor și a publicului față de influența folclorului național asupra cântecelor prezentate la Eurovision, integrat în textul poetic și muzical al pieselor.

Cuvinte-cheie: Eurovision, muzică pop, cântec, hit, folclor național

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is one of the major popular music annual events in the European Union which has been organized since 1956. As for the contest's history, the official web page relates that "The Eurovision Song Contest is one of the longest running television shows in the world. It was on the 24th of May, 1956, that Europe saw the first Eurovision Song Contest. Since that time the contest has been one of the most typical European traditions and without doubt, Europe's favourite TV show. In 2005, the Eurovision Song Contest celebrated its 50th anniversary by picking the best entry to date in 2015 the 60th anniversary with Eurovision Song Contest's Greatest Hits in London as well as with a conference [1].

The contest's ontological status that assured its longivive existence depends on the European Broadcasting Union (EBU)'s appearance, "formed on 12th February, 1950 by 23 broadcasting organizations from Europe and the Mediterranean. In 1955, the EBU "came up with the idea of an international song contest whereby countries, represented by their respective public broadcasters, that would participate in a television show, to be transmitted simultaneously in all represented nations" [1].

During its history many famous singers and groups took part in the competition, more or less successful by such as: ABBA, Celine Dion, Cliff Richard, Julio Iglesias, Bonnie Tyler and others. It is interesting to note that European or even world fame doesn't mean success within the Eurovision contest, the example is Bonnie Tyler who has taken the 19th place with the song *Believe in Me* obtaining 23 points, unlike the Moldovan singer Aliona Moon having a very limited national and international experience has got the 11th place with a song *O mie* obtaining 71 points.

One of the most important topics related to the ESC is its political dimension. The demonstrative example is *The Complete & Independent Guide to the Eurovision Song Contest 2016* [2]. Despite this, the edition is totally based on statistical data, there is a special section in the countries which never vote each other. Therefore, the researches accept the fact that the political or geopolitical aspect is still very important. There are a lot of examples of political fight via ESC in the contest's history, for instance, "Greece withdrew from the 1975 contest because Turkey was making its Eurovision debut; the following year Greece presented *Panaghia mou* (My homeland), a song protesting the Turkish invasion of Cyprus, In 1969 the contest was held in Madrid, but Austria refused to participate in protest of Franco's regime. In 1982, during the Falklands War in Argentina, Britain hosted the contest and Spain contributed a tango" [2, p. 4].

The recent example of the same approach is the participation of Ukraine in 2016 with the song *1944* with allusions to the Stalinist history of Crimean Tatars. Of course, these allusions have been decoded by the audience in an actual political contest (USA and EU sanctions against Russia). At the same time the Russian Federation representative Sergey Lazarev has had a brilliant show with *You Are the Only One* written by a team of international composers Dimitris Kontopoulos, Philip K., John Ballard, Ralph Charlie obtaining the 3rd place gathering 491 points [1].

The political aspect of the contest is analyzed as well in another edition *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest* [3]. It is mentioned about in the article which "analyzes ESC voting patterns from 1975 to 1992, before the participation of new Eastern European nations, to reveal three main blocs (Western, Northern and Mediterranean) based on political, cultural, linguistic and/or geographical connections" [3, p. XX]. The phenomenon when neighborhood countries vote each other, indifferent of the quality of a song or the singer's experience, has got a special definition "buddy voting" [3, p. 4].

There are some trends observed by researchers. For instance, Fred Bronson in his article *Never Mind the Balkans. Serbian "Bloc" Storms Eurovision Party*, appeared in *Billboard* in 2007 made a reference to the "Veteran of U.K. Eurovision commentator/presenter, who has covered events for the BBC since the '70s" [4, p.12] who complains about the existence of a "definite Baltic bloc and a Balkan bloc; and they've been jointed in the recent years by a Russian bloc," [idem]. Terry Wogan's conclusion is quite pessimistic: "It's a pity, it's not about the songs anymore" [idem]. These realities contradict in

some ways the ESC organizers' statement that "ESC is an example of open and democratic approach, an attempt to create a friendly atmosphere, to distance from the political and ideological fights". [3, p. 16].

The history of the Republic of Moldova's participation in ESC starts in 2005, being caused by the idea, that ESC is a chance for some countries (especially, small and young nations) to confirm their cultural importance. The special attitude towards the *Eurovision* movement is observed here. During the last decade the national selection has become a major popular music event of the year, attracting singers, composers, producers, critics, the wide public, generating a storm of posts in the *Facebook*. During these years the most prospective and successful singers and bands took part in the event (see the list of Moldovan national winners and their results in a semifinal and final competitions below):

- 2005 Zdob și Zdub *Boonika bate toba* (6th place, 148 points) en/ro
- 2006 Arsenium feat. Natalia Gordienko *Loca* (20th place, 22 points)
- 2007 Natalia Barbu *Fight* (10th place, 109 points)
- 2008 Geta Burlacu *A Century of Love* (12th place, 36 (semifinal))
- 2009 Nelly Ciobanu *Hora din Moldova/Hora from Moldova* (14th place, 69 points)
- 2010 Sun StrokeProject and Olea Tira *Run Away* (22nd place, 27 points)
- 2011 Zdob și Zdub *So Lucky* (12th place, 97 points)
- 2012 Pasha Parfeny *Lăutar/ Fiddler* (11th place, 81 points)
- 2013 Aliona Moon *O mie* (11th place, 71) ro
- 2014 Cristina Scarlat *Wild Soul* (16th place, 13 points, semifinal)
- 2015 Eduard Romanyuta *I Want Your Love* (11th place, 41 points, semifinal)
- 2016 Lidia Isac *Falling Stars* (17th place, 33 points, semifinal)

ESC creates a lot of illusions and myths among Moldovan artists. The first myth is the following: the participation in *Eurovision* might open the door to the EU music market. Meanwhile there is no anyone in Moldova, who would have made a European career after participating in ESC. For instance, Aliona Moon, positioned as "a rising star on the Moldovan music scene"[1], obtaining the 11th place in 2013 with the touching ballad *O Mie* (composed by her producer, the talented Moldovan composer and singer Pasha Parfeni), didn't demonstrate any achievement in her music career – neither at home land nor abroad.

Another myth is connected with the fact that the song written by an international team of poets, composers and sound producers, might guarantee the success of a local artist at ESC. Lidia Isac (producer Sergey Orlov) with the song *Falling Stars*, composed by Gabriel Alares, Sebastian Lestapier, Ellen Berg and Leonid Gutkin, has lost the semifinal with *17 points*.

Another important dilemma of the Moldovan ESC movement, including the selection process, is connected with the composers and public attitude towards national folklore influences. These might be integrated in poetic and musical texts of songs represented at the *Eurovision*. Almost each year the following topics – "is the national representative of Eurovision obliged or not to introduce some elements of national folklore in their songs? Is it a key to success at ESC or we have to ignore it in favor of actual trends in European pop-music?" – are hotly debated. Despite the rhetorical question, the Moldovan practice gives a positive answer. For instance, the most valuable pieces represented during recent years have some distinctive elements of national folklore. Among them are *Boonika bate toba* performed by Zdob și Zdub, *Hora din Moldova/Hora from Moldova* presented by Nelly Ciobanu, *Lăutar/ Fiddler* performed by Pasha Parfeny.

In *Boonika bate toba* (*Grandmamma Beats the Drum*) you can find some characteristics of poetic and musical style of popular Moldovan rock-band related to folk tradition. Its poetical text demonstrates an eclectic and polystylistic approach; a mixture of Romanian and English is used with an emphasis on popular speech and lexical patterns of youth subculture. The song refrain is composed in Romanian:

Bunica bate doba (Hey)

Bunica bate tare (Hey)

Bunica bate doba cu machuca 'n casa mare

The rhythm peculiarities (symmetrical structures, regular accentuated rhythmic patterns, binary meters etc.) might be treated as an influence of Moldovan folk tradition. The musical language is based on modal-tonal centralization, *ostinato*, linear texture, while, the timbre palette includes imitations of *nai* and *fluer* and violin unisons typical of a *taraf* (Moldovan folk orchestra) performance. At two composition level, mixed forms with enhanced role of dance fragments in popular style, can be found, being treated as the influence of the compositional logic of the Moldovan folk instrumental suite [5, p. 45].

Hora din Moldova is based on a contrast of slow introduction composed in a rich ornamented melody, similar to *doina*'s melodic style, and it is fast in *steady tempo* in the main section, typical of Moldovan dances like *hora*. The trumpet *solo* is composed in a distinctive folklore manner, the intervention of a specific method named *hăitura* (a kind of rhythmical organized poetic speech on drums background) which penetrates into Nelly Ciobanu's interpretation, creating a balanced lyrical/melodic and dance/rhythmical expression.

These proven techniques are developed by Pasha Parfeny, who together with Alex Brașoveanu (another talented young composer, the author of a *Fight*, song that helped Natalia Barbu to take the 10th place in 2007), composed the hit *Lăutar/Fiddler*. Its timbre palette has been enriched with quite large solos performed by violin and dulcimer (*țambal*, another traditional instrument). A individual treatment of melodic and harmonic material, distanced enough from the folklore prototype, should to be pointed out.

Being a major annual pop-music event in Moldova ESC mobilizes young singers, composers and producers, influencing positively Moldova's popular music market and increasing professionalism and the commercial competence of local music-makers. Meanwhile, the lack of other possibilities for promotion leads to the appearance of a big number of newcomers who don't have enough experience (or for whom singing is just a hobby) and therefore fail the competition. As for the famous and experienced Moldovan singers, they feel a danger to fail the national selection and don't participate. That's why the popularity of the contest goes down during the last years.

Another risk for the local musicians is the change of rules of the ESC, for instance, the new conditions, approved in 2015, which admit the participation of foreign composers, songs, performers in local competitions. In these circumstances, the competition increases for local actors. Moldovan music lovers remember the scandal provoked by local artists after the Ukrainian singer Eduard Romanyta won the competition in 2015, or an abundance of songs by composers from EU in the last editions of the national selection.

Let's make some conclusions. ESC is a fusion of different (sometimes contradictory) political and cultural realities, mass culture' myths, music trends, technological achievements and artistic challenges. "ESC can be perceived as representing several kinds of phenomena. Apart from the nominal purpose of the event – to select annually, by way of a contest, "the best" of a number of popular songs of European origin – it is also a lavish entertainment show intended for prime-time television; a display of public-service broadcasting professionalism, a thrilling dramatized narrative of success and failure; a display of music representations of national identities; a marketing device for perhaps not-very-commercial "commercial" music; and the focal point for a widely dispersed fan/collector culture" [3, p.16]. In case of Moldova it is a major promotion tool for young artists, a trigger for music industry development, a motive for a national act of union. "When Moldovan artists sing the song for the Eurovision Contest, the music fans from both banks of the river Nistru cheer for them equally, sharing their feelings and understanding that we are the same nation" [6].

Bibliographic references

1. <http://www.eurovision.tv/page/history> (December 8, 2016).

2. The Complete & Independent Guide to the Eurovision Song Contest 2016. Complete&Independent Guide, 9th year of Publication, by Simon Barclay, General editor, Silverthorn Publishing, 2016.
3. A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest edited by Ivan Raykoff, Robert Deam, Tobin Ashgate Publishing Limited, England, 2007.
4. Bronson, Fred. Never mind the Balkans. Serbian “Bloc” Storms Eurovision Party. **In:** *Billboard*. May 26, 2007, p.12.
5. TCACENCO V. „Океан Ельзи” versus „Zdob și Zdub”: repere comparative. **In:** *Arta*, nr.2, 2014, p.45-51.
6. <https://www.culturepartnership.eu/en/article/victoria-tcacenco> (January, 25, 2017)