

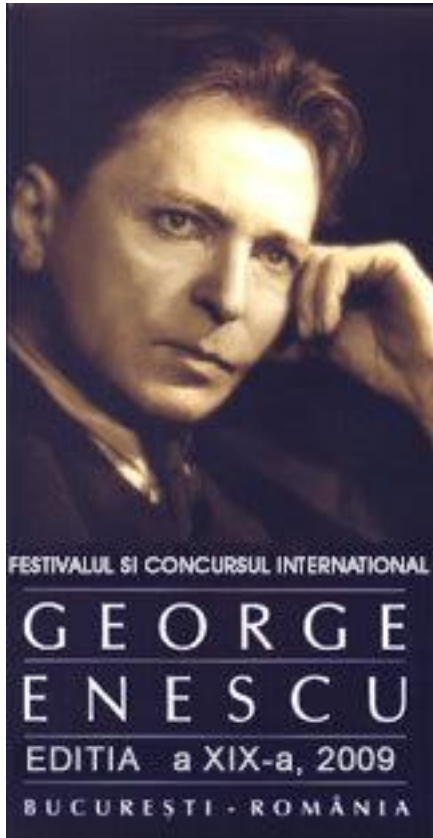
Romania Resurgent: The 19th 'George Enescu' International Festival and Competition

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'The mighty Salzburg Festival now has a rival' – The Guardian

Doors previously closed to the world were swiftly unbarred following the Romanian Revolution almost two decades ago. One of Central Europe's great cultural centres, Bucharest, certainly gained a new lease on life. The city's 'George Enescu' International Festival and Competition became a leading player in Romania's resurgence in the years following the overthrow of Nicolae Ceauşescu's despotic regime. It shines today as a beacon of excellence among international festivals, distinguished by a programme blend of superb Romanian musicians and outstanding visiting orchestras, ensembles and artists. With the prospect of early autumn sunshine, an unbeatable local atmosphere and more than 100 concerts, recitals and opera performances, Bucharest is undoubtedly the top destination for music lovers this September.

The Festival, launched in 1958 to honour Romania's greatest composer, continues to serve George Enescu's memory and foster his legacy as creative artist, performer and inspirational teacher. The Guardian's Salzburg Festival comparison, printed as a bold headline during the biennial 'George Enescu' Festival's 18th edition in September 2007, certainly bears close inspection. The 19th Festival's programme would grace any international festival. Devised under the honorary presidency and artistic directorship of Ioan Hollender, director of the Vienna State Opera, its contents speak of serious artistic quality and repertoire depth.

This year's Festival opens on 30 August with the first of two stagings of Enescu's operatic masterpiece, OEDIPE, produced by Bucharest National Opera and conducted by Oleg Caetani. The fine cast is led by Franck Ferrari, whose title-role performance harvested critical superlatives after the co-production's presentation last October at the Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse.

Other glittering highlights include a performance of Bruckner's Ninth Symphony with the George Enescu Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Maxim Vengerov, two concerts of works by Enescu, Debussy, Schumann and Shostakovich from the Philharmonia Orchestra under Vladimir Ashkenazy, and a fascinating pairing of Enescu's Third Suite with Berlioz's SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE performed by the Orchestre du Capitole de Toulouse and its exciting young principal guest conductor, Tugan Sokhiev. Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven are on the bill for two concerts given by the Academy of St Martin in the Fields, with Murray Perahia as soloist and conductor.

The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and Mariss Jansons are also set to perform two programmes, opening their 'George Enescu' International Festival account with Beethoven's 'Eroica' and exploring works by Weber, Haydn and Dvořák in their second concert. Héléne Grimaud is soloist in Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No.2 with the St Petersburg Philharmonic and Yuri Temirkanov in the second of the orchestra's two concerts. Maestro Jansons, meanwhile, returns to conduct Beethoven's Seventh Symphony and the 'Prelude and Liebestod' from Wagner's TRISTAN und ISOLDE with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. The Swingle Singers turn their vocal expertise to Berio's SINFONIA for a performance with the Romanian National Radio Orchestra conducted by Asher Fisch.

Concerts from the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra with Charles Dutoit and Martha Argerich, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande under Marek Janowski, the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and Dmitri Kitaenko, and the Orchestra of the Maggio Musicale, Florence, under Roberto Abbado's direction further underline the range and class of the Festival's orchestral programme. The roster of soloists is equally impressive, with Joshua Bell, Nelson Freire, Lynne Harrell, Daniel Hope, John Lill, Yo-Yo Ma, Mischa Maisky, Maria João Pires, and Jean-Yves Thibaudet among featured artists.

Devotees of historically informed performance are also strikingly well served by the Festival. THE CREATION will be given in the neo-baroque splendour of Bucharest's Atheneum by Les Musiciens du Louvre and Marc Minkowski to mark Haydn's bicentenary year, while soprano Kate Royal, Les Arts Florissants and William Christie commemorate the 250th anniversary of Handel's death with a performance of his oratorio SUSANNA

A further 36 concerts will take place outside Bucharest, in the cities of Braşov, Cluj, Iaşi, Sibiu and Timișoara, the outcome of an idea conceived in 1998 by former artistic director Lawrence Foster to broaden the Festival's reach within Romania.

In short, the 'George Enescu' International Festival and its highly regarded Competition are events of global significance. "Between 1958 and 1970, the Festival attracted so many important musicians," recalls its Manager, Mihai Constantinescu. "Karajan, Menuhin, Rubinstein, Sir John Barbirolli, David Oistrakh and many others came here then." The Festival, reinstated after the revolution in 1991, overcame challenges set by Romania's transition to a market economy and progressed to enjoy a period of unprecedented growth. Since 2001 it has attracted heavy investment from the Romanian government, together with support from CNN and other multinational media partners, and sponsorship from such global companies as Mercedes Benz and Hewlett Packard, Unicredit and ING. In 2007, five performances at Bucharest's monumental 4,100-seat Palace Hall Sala Mare attracted capacity audiences, as did many Festival events presented elsewhere.

The organisers are expecting to beat all box-office records this year and boost the Festival's international profile. "It's a big thing for Romania to invite 13 symphony orchestras, five chamber orchestras and great artists from around the world," he observes "I think our politicians realise how important the Festival is abroad; they know it is a global event. Multinational companies are coming to us from edition to edition, sponsoring the Festival, which is so important for the whole country." To be regarded as a rival to the Salzburg Summer Festival clearly matters to Constantinescu and his Enescu Festival colleagues. "This view is very important to us," he says. "Of course, they have a longer season and more concerts. But in terms of the important orchestras and artists coming to our Festival, it is a very accurate comparison."

In addition to its central commitment to the work of George Enescu, the Festival also provides an unmatched service for the promotion of young Romanian composers and performers. The Romanian Composers' Union, a key partner since the Festival's foundation, has been closely involved with shaping this year's Romanian Contemporary Music series. Meanwhile,

the related Enescu and His Contemporaries strand amounts to a festival within a festival, including beguiling programmes from the Nash Ensemble, the Keller Quartet, Cedrik Tiberghien, Ilya Gringolts, Eugene Urgorski and Konstantin Lifschitz.

“It was the idea of the original Festival to promote Enescu and also Romanian contemporary composers,” notes Ioan Holender – the director of the Wiener Staatsoper and artistic director of the Festival. “We are determined to keep this idea alive in order to promote Romanian culture. We have to show the real image of Romania, because our country is so often misrepresented abroad. We have a rich culture and history; we’re genuine Europeans, at the heart of Europe. Enescu is recognised as an international figure, but I now want the entire Festival to be presented to the world as the true image of today’s Romania.”

For further information: www.festivalenescu.ro

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