



Dana Cătălina Chițu is intent on reviving interest in Maria Tănase



ROMANIA'S FORGOTTEN DIVA

This year marks the centenary of the birth of Romania's celebrated singer Maria Tănase. Philip Sweeney talks to Oana Cătălina Chițu about her homage to the legendary singer

PHOTOS ERIKA BORBELY HANSEN

If Bucharest is celebrating the centenary of the birth of its greatest popular singer of the modern era – the Romanian Edith Piaf – it's not obvious. Paris fields a succession of Piaf tribute shows even in non-centenary years, but Bucharest, the one-time Paris of the East, contains, on a lightning souvenir recce, one pavement dealer with a battered Maria Tănase LP, and lots of indifferent shrugs in response to Tănase's name. Out in the artists' section of Bellu Cemetery, among the film directors and opera stars, Tănase's ornate granite grave is unadorned with flowers. The chic cafés of the 30s where Tănase sang and socialised with her poet and writer friends – the Continental, Casa Capsa, the Cina – still exist, but are either flashily refurbished or dowdily unatmospheric. Scenes of the diva's triumphs such as the neon bedecked Constantin Tănase theatre or the 60s brutalist Dalles concert hall bear no sign of her presence. The Tănase legend is evidently not the subject of acute public enthusiasm.

I'm off up country to meet a lady who is trying to remedy this. Not single-handedly: there have been other recent Tănase recordings, some eminent – the Balanescu Quartet and Nigel Kennedy among them – but the torch is currently in the possession of the Berlin domiciled singer Oana Cătălina Chițu. Track one of Chițu's album *Divine* is the perfect accompaniment for my trip. 'Trenule Masina Mica' (Train, Little Train), begins with a lurching accordion figure supported by plunking ▶

TĂNASE BECAME A LEADING LIGHT OF BUCHAREST, THE PRE-WAR PARIS OF THE EAST



MARIA TĂNASE ON RECORD

Oriente Musik have released three albums of re-mastered Maria Tănase recordings: *Magic Bird: The Early Years (1936-1939)*, *Ciuleandra (1955-1957)* and *Malédiction d'Amour (1955-1957)*. The latter is the best place to start with several of Tănase's best-known songs like 'Lume, Lume' and four from Oana Cătălina Chițu's *Divine* album.



cimbalom, trap drum and double bass, joined by Chițu's voice replicating the trademark Tănase falsetto whoop decoration, before accelerating to the finish amid skirling Gypsy violin and sax. Chițu is on her annual summer holiday in the small northern town of Humulesti, to which a large, elderly but comfortable *trenule* conveys me through fields dotted with haystacks and horse carts. Chițu receives me in the little family house hidden among an orchard and garden where her mother has prepared a tasty meal of oxtail stew and *tuică* plum brandy. So why is Oana Chițu singing Tănase, and why now?

"I've wanted to do a Tănase album for a long time," says the singer, one eye on her young son playing among the flowerbeds. "I included Tănase songs on my first two albums, and then I realised 2013 would be the perfect time. It was Berlin where I really found Maria Tănase again." Chițu's rediscovery was aided by the growing numbers of Berlin's Romanian music lovers and by experts such as the researcher

Grit Friedrich, whose delving into the forgotten archives of Bucharest entertainment lore has contributed much to recent Tănase scholarship, not least the excellent trio of remastered Tănase CDs released by Oriente Musik [see left].

Cosmopolitan Berlin, where Chițu moved to join her sister in the mid-90s, was a revelation. "As a child in Communist Romania, I felt completely isolated, you only glimpsed the outside world on television." First studying African history in Germany, she changed in her mid-20s to music, and enrolled for piano and voice tuition with both jazz and operatic teachers. In her new home district, the buzzingly multicultural and alternative Kreuzberg, she met a young Serbian accordion virtuoso named Dejan Jovanovic, also studying classical music, and formed her group *Romenca*, whose first CD in 2000 featured mainly Balkan Gypsy music. Chițu's first solo record in 2007 explored the world of Romanian tango, popular in sophisticated pre-war Bucharest. Was music a family tradition? "Not professionally," says Chițu, "though my father was a good singer. He managed Humulesti's state-owned café/bar, and he'd sing to the customers in the evening. And I sang in choirs at school."

As for the Gypsy element, Chițu was fascinated since childhood by her country's omnipresent, reviled and still largely hermetic patchwork of Roma tribes. "My parents weren't anti-Gypsy. My mother even told me romantic stories of their horse caravans. But people tell you to keep away from Gypsies... I always thought that couldn't be right. There's a famous 70s Russian film *Gypsies Go to Heaven*, very popular with Gypsies and non-Gypsies. I saw it five times in the cinema in the nearby town of Târgu Neamț. Partly I was just fascinated by the groups of Gypsies in the queues." One of her early jobs in Berlin was teaching music in an education project for Gypsy children, where accordionist Jovanovic still works.

The themes of Chițu's subsequent repertoire – old cosmopolitan Bucharest and Gypsies – were established early, and both led to Maria Tănase, the great half-forgotten diva. The young Tănase too fell under the spell of Gypsy music, along with a plethora of regional folk styles, discovered from the country women who worked in her family's horticultural business in the Bucharest suburb of Caramidari in the 20s and 30s. Though Caramidari's old green alleyways were long ago immersed in concrete, elements of this rural/urban intermingling still exist in modern Bucharest, incidentally, in the crowds of Kalderash Roma in voluminous patterned skirts selling herbs and flowers at Bucharest's huge Obor market.

As Tănase's vocal gift began to attract engagements in the cafés and cabarets, and later in the most prestigious concert halls, her avid song collecting also flourished, and Tănase began to move in exalted circles, working closely with the eminent ethnomusicologist intellectuals Harry Brauner and Constantin Brăiloiu, recording in Vienna and representing Romania in the 1939 New York World Fair. At the same time, she befriended the *crème* of Bucharest, had an affair with the painter Brâncuși and became a leading light of the pre-war Paris of the East. Which led to her first eclipse: the partly Jewish intellectual company she relished, along with her even more unsuitable penchant for Gypsies, attracted the wrath of the fascist Iron Guard of Marshal Ion Antonescu, then Nazi-allied ruler of the country. "Tănase's records and films were ▶



“I WANTED TO REFLECT THE OPEN, VARIED ATMOSPHERE OF TĂNASE’S BUCHAREST”

destroyed. It's very hard to find Tănase memorabilia today. That's why work like Grit's is so important," comments Chițu. Tănase's rehabilitation by post-war communism was a mixed blessing. For one thing, the flirtation with jazz and modern music Tănase had cherished was dropped in favour of straight folklore. For another, the last thing progressive Romanians valued in the decades after Tănase's death in 1962 was the aesthetic approval of the feared Ceaușescu regime.

When Chițu set about her Tănase interpretations, she says, she wanted above all to avoid mimicry. Consequently, the arrangements draw on the multicultural background of Kreuzberg with flamenco guitar and jazz harmonies augmenting the mix – but no attempt to replicate the big orchestras of Gypsy *lăutari* (traditional Roma musicians) favoured by Tănase. “I wanted to reflect the open, varied atmosphere of Tănase's Bucharest,” says the singer, “and modern Berlin has that atmosphere.”

The most magnetic elements of the Tănase repertoire,

arguably, are the *doinas*, dark laments of primeval misery, which the diva invests with vitriolic power, helped by a sinisterly droning orchestra. On the new CD Chițu tackles one of the most famous, ‘Cine Iubește și Lasă’ (He Who Loves and Runs Away) backed solely by a faintly psychotic Piazzolla-like accordion. Her voice, generally softer and sweeter than Tănase's, descends to deliver a suitably hair-raising rendition. “Tănase's voice became deeper and more dramatic with age,” says Chițu, “and mine too, it's a process of ripening.” I could have done with more *doinas*, I comment, specially the brilliant one about the young girl driving her old husband to hang himself with her song of yearning for a young lover. “Yes,” says Chițu, “so could I, but our audiences always ask for ‘Cine Iubește’ and the *doinas* are so strong, we thought one was enough for the record.”

If Oana Cătălina Chițu's approach is international, the singer herself is proudly Humulestian, as is her extensive stage wardrobe, a collection of silk dresses created by a dressmaker friend during Chițu's yearly visits, and ready to be displayed during a series of new shows this autumn. “I'm not performing in Bucharest though,” says Chițu, “I haven't been asked.” An omission the city of the Romanian Piaf would be wise to remedy before 2013 is out. ♦

♦ **ALBUM** *Divine* was reviewed in issue #94

♦ **PODCAST** Hear a track from Oana Cătălina Chițu's album, *Divine*, on this issue's podcast