THE GREAT RESTORATION WORK
OF
THE ROMANIAN ATHENAEUM

The “George Enescu” Philharmonic Collection

Under the High Patronage of His Majesty King Michael I of Romania
Collection Coordinator: Cristina Sârbu
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INTRODUCTION
where you can find out

• from historian Gheorghe Parusi, about the long story regarding the plot of land where the Romanian Athenaeum is located today;

• from historian Cristian Popescu, about the manner whereby a group of passionate intellectuals of the 19th century changed a would-be riding house into the temple of the Romanian culture, which would afterwards become the concert hall of the Romanian Philharmonic, the Romanian Athenaeum;

• from architect Raluca Nicoară, about the numerous transformations the Athenaeum building underwent, since 1888, when it was built, and until its renovation in the ’90s.

THE EFFORTS OF THE BENEFICIARY
the “George Enescu” Philharmonic

The “George Enescu” Philharmonic is the institution that, almost from its beginnings, has been using and supporting the monumental building of the Romanian Athenaeum. Thus, the Philharmonic was the one that struggled for its renovation, especially due to Cristian Mandean, who was its manager between 1991 and 2010 and who has also told us about his wholehearted efforts made in order to obtain funding and support for the extensive restoration work.
It has been 57 years since the București Company Project, “a first-rate leader in the field of architectural design and town planning, started its constant activity, with an essential role in the development of Bucharest”. This company was in charge of carrying out the design works. Mrs. Raluca Nicoară, an architect and head of the design team, explains to us both thoroughly and plainly, the details concerning the great restoration of the Romanian Athenaeum building.

Marius Stan and Teodor Ioan Oprean are employed by ‘Aedificia Carpați’, the company that carried out this work with enormous responsibility. With its 46 year experience, Aedificia Carpați holds the most impressive portfolio of construction and renovation work in Romania. This includes the Cotroceni Palace, the Palace of the Parliament, the Peleş Castle, the National Bank of Romania, the Central University Library, the National Museum of Contemporary Art, as well as many others. Its highly competent teams of workers are coordinated by professionals, with modern management and using state-of-the-art technologies that cover the whole range of buildings and renovations to the highest standards. The work performed at the Romanian Athenaeum was managed by engineer Petre Badea, (General Manager), engineer Ștefan Drăgulescu, (Executive Manager) and engineer Ion Tarta, Executive Manager.
The ground where the Romanian Athenaeum and the park square in front of it are located today, was once Livedea Văcăreștilor (the Orchard of the Văcărești family, members of the nobility), named after the site owners. Stretching at the northern edge of Bucharest in the eighteenth century and beginning of the next one, the land belonged to Ianache Văcărescu, who was killed by the Turks in Constantinople in 1714, along with Constantin Brâncoveanu, whose faithful advisor he had been.

Ianache's fortune was inherited by his four sons while the orchard, much larger than the later Diocese Garden, went to his older children, Radu and Constantin.

At the marriage of his daughter, Ilinca, with Mihai Cantacuzino, vel-logofăt Constantin gave her his share of the family orchard as a dowry. After Ilinca's death (in 1763 or 1764) the property remained in the possession of her husband. Around 1766, Mihai Cantacuzino started buying more parcels of land surrounding the property that had been his wife's dowry, in order to build a church and a school for needy children there. He also included the piece of land owned by Radu, Ilinca's uncle, by swapping it for a similar property. The land belonged to Ianache Văcărescu, who was killed by the Turks.

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It was a fairly large garden for those times and places, crowded with the properties of the great aristocratic families, measuring about 5000 square meters. This is why, the rulers at the end of the eighteenth century began to pay attention to it. A document dated 14th March, 1796, issued by the office of Alexandru Moruzi, ordered the great treasurer to take out “from the of the Treasurer and the High Steward” four of the “tax payers of properties in the slum area of my town”, the four “lude” (owners exempt from paying taxes) being always in charge with “the cleansing and beautifying of the garden of this Monastery (the Diocese Garden). The renewal of the document, almost on the same terms, under Alexandru Ipsilanti, who “renewed and strengthened his predecessor’s mercy” on 8th September, 1797, stands proof of the fulfillment of the command which was being supervised by the reigning ruler. The four noblemen, who were exempt from paying the taxes, were given “a seal from the reigning ruler to have handy in order to make it known that they were protected from paying the taxes and other fees to the Treasury in order to be able to take care of those gardens”. Here at this Monastery of the Râmnic Diocese, Prince Friedrich of Saxe-Coburg was accommodated in the fall of 1788, during the war with the Turks.

It seems that Alexandru Ipsilanti’s order was observed further on, even if was not renewed by the rulers who followed, because the garden continued to exist throughout the nineteenth century, in an area increasingly busy under construction, either in better or poorer condition, but it was not left to ruin similarly to many of the other pieces of waste ground scattered around the town. The proof of the fact that the site was given continual attention and it was very popular among the inhabitants of the city of Bucharest, was also the fact that on 6th December, 1830, the first national flag of the Romanian army was consecrated in “the yard of this small Monastery of the Diocese”, “all the noblemen of the country and all the members of the Ruling Chamber” (the Public Assembly) attending the consecration ceremony.

However, the Church, without a secure income (had no estates, no vineyards or other properties), crumbled gradually becoming a danger to the people who were approaching its walls, so it was torn down in the second half of the nineteenth century between 1861 and 1864. An eagle with its wings spread and a cross on its head was installed atop a stone column on the place where the altar was. In 1872, under the entrepreneurship of A. Godillot, the rearranging of the garden began, which received a modern look (the entrepreneur Godillot, who was the supplier of the army in Cuza’s time, had already coordinated other important works: the slaughterhouse, the slaughterhouse. The proof of the
fountain of Filaret and the central halls in the Union Square). The stone column still remained in its place on the eastern edge of the Diocese Garden for a while. A piece of land at the end of the Diocese Garden was taken by the Romanian Equestrian Society that started building a riding house in 1874 that was to be used for the riding school and the circus performances. The construction advanced with difficulty because of the lack of funds, and stopped altogether shortly after the foundation was laid.

The “Romanian Athenaeum” Society, that in November 1886, had set its objective of building a palace corresponding to the cultural role it had established and that would be suitable for carrying out its activities: conferences, exhibitions, musical performances, etc., received from the City Hall, after Dr. Constantin Esarcu’ persistence, the land in the Garden Diocese that the Equestrian Society, to whom compensation was payable, had left. Neither the “Romanian Athenaeum” Society was better off with the money, being forced to ask for the public to contribute with donations to complement the funds. The donations from public charity were not large, but they offered us the idiom “A penny for the Athenaeum”. Due to the financial hardships, the building of the Athenaeum spanned for several decades; although the official inauguration took place on 14th December, 1888, the building was far from being finished at the time, and in 1889 the lack of funds caused the cessation of the works (when it came to the solution of donations and the above-mentioned public contribution). Resumed in 1893, the works will be completed in 1897, and from 1924 to 1928 a new addition was made to the northern side of the building on Diocese Street. The stone column remained in front of the Romanian Athenaeum for a while, because in 1888, the mayor Pache Protopopescu moved it to the place that was to be called the Rosetti Square, where it remained until the early twentieth century, when Rosetti’s statue was to be located there. ‘Pache’s Matchstick’ as the stone column in the Diocese Garden used to be called was moved to Queen Mary Square in 1902 (that until then had born George Coșbuc’s name). It stood there even during the communist regime, but it was destroyed during the 1977 earthquake and it was not rebuilt afterwards.

The building of the riding house and then, that of the Romanian Athenaeum changed the appearance of the Garden Diocese. Firstly, losing its initial name, the garden began to be known more and more by the name of the new and imposing edifice, a true emblem of the city; and secondly the surface was reduced drastically and after subsequent interventions it decreased even more. Many of the transformations the garden experienced were related to the natural process of modernizing the whole area and the city in general. Located in the centre of it, near the Royal Palace, some houses belonging to high society families (Constantin Boerescu, Crețeanu, Nicolae Cesianu, Slătineanu, Filipescu, Lahovari, Iancu Manu and others) and some great shops very popular among the “high life members” of the capital (a famous hosiery’s shop was actually called “the High Life” while the Jockey Club was in Barbu Slătineanu’s houses in front of the Athenaeum), both the garden and the surrounding area were all the time under the supervision of the local householders of the capital.

Over time, there were located there the busts of scholars: C.A. Rosetti, Mihail Kogălniceanu, V.A. Urechia, Constantin Esarcu, Ienăchiță Văcărescu, Traian Demetrescu, Gh. Dem. Teodorescu and Th. Șerbănescu, the allegorical monument dedicated to General I.Em. Floresco and the statue called ‘the Runners’ (or ‘Towards an Ideal’) which was placed there in 1913. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, across from the garden, Constantin Boerescu, the brother of the great lawyer and politician Vasile Borescu, built a spacious house. The Cesianu family soon afterwards became the owners of that house and in 1922, it became the restaurant called ‘the Diner’. Between 1912-1914, on the other side further north, on the ground that had once belonged to a large landowner, Nicolae Niculescu - the place where Gerasim’s inn had been once - hotel ‘Athénée Palace’, one of the most luxurious hotels of the city, was built.

In 1950, the Athenaeum Garden, as it had begun to be called more and more often, was undergoing the last major conversions: all the statues were removed, the paths and the flower beds were rearranged, the garden becoming what it is still today, a small green space in front of the Athenaeum. Its surface was further reduced by creating a parking place on the Palace side. The statue called ‘the Runners’ sculpted by Alfred Boucher, firstly placed at the intersection between Calea Victoriei and Biserica Amzei Street, was moved in front of the Dinamo stadium for a while, but then it was brought back. In 1965, Mihai Eminescu's statue, sculpted in bronze by Gheorghe Anghel, was placed in its present location in front of the Athenaeum. Nowadays, only the name of a neighboring street is reminiscent of the old Monastery that belonged to the Râmnic Diocese. Although it retains none of the charm of the old Diocese Garden, the square in front of the Athenaeum remains today an oasis of peace and vegetation in an area conquered by asphalt.
In 1865 a group of passionate art and culture enthusiasts, namely, Constantin Esarcu, C.A. Rosetti, V.A. Urechia, Nicolae Kretzulescu and Al. Odobescu laid the foundations of the Cultural Society of the Romanian Athenaeum. They all desired that the future society would have its headquarters in an “edifice to be solely dedicated to art and science, its architecture having obviously to fulfill this purpose”

The city hall donated the land where the foundations of the prospective riding house had already been laid, as the edifice belonged to the Romanian Equestrian Society. The dimensions included in the design were significant. Yet, the initial destination of the land was changed and the building of the Romanian Athenaeum was to be raised in place of the riding house.

The design of the French architect Albert Galleron, who had designed the Palace of the National Bank (1880–1885) in Bucharest, was chosen out of all the designs put forward. The new design was to use the already existing foundations. Making up a circle, these foundations would be the basis for the concert hall.

Albert Galleron was to be assisted by a technical commission, comprised of Romanian architects and engineers: Grigore Cherchez, Al. Orăscu, Constantin Băicoianu, Ion Mincu and Ion Socolescu. The members of the commission had accomplished their academic studies in Paris and shared the same artistic and technical conceptions with the designer.

The foundation stone was laid on 26th October, 1886, and the construction was started on the initial foundations and a circular-shaped central structure came into being. There were two stages of construction: the first was between 1886 and 1889, when the main structure and the dome covering it were erected, whilst the second stage took place between the years 1893 and 1897, when the annex behind the Athenaeum was built.

As a construction system, the Athenaeum is sustained by weight-bearing brickwork. The dome has a metal structure made by the company in Beuchtel that specialised in this type of construction. The agreement with the company was concluded on 9th February, 1887. The designer was I. Schwalbach, who also monitored the fitting initiated in June 1887 and which was finalised six months later.

The French Architect Albert Galleron recommended the use of this circular metal structure above the brick drum as the best in this situation, since “this framing represents a very solid unit, which is suitable especially for those countries subject to earthquakes”. Thus, he was among the first designers who considered the seismic risk specific to the region of our country and to Bucharest.

The first stage of construction ended in November 1887 with the interior and exterior finishing works to be completed at a later date. During the official opening which was held on 14th February, 1888, Alexandru Odobescu held a conference. A year later, on 5th March, 1889, the concert hall would be also finished and the philharmonic orchestra conducted by Eduard Wachman would give the first concert there.

Over a period of years, Architect Leonida Negrescu finalised the other works, as well; i.e. the two-storeys wings located on the left and right side of the main entrance. The fresco, that Alexandru Odobescu had ordered for the concert hall, even from the opening of the Athenaeum, had to be, according to the former and to Constantin Esarcu, “an image of the uniqueness of the Romanian spirit”. The painted area is 75 meters long and 3 meters high. In 1901, the painters Ştefan Popescu and Costin Petrescu submitted their drafts and the latter’s draft was accepted. According to the draft, the fresco was to display the history of the Romanian people in 25 scenes. The work on the fresco did not start until 1933 and was inaugurated on 26th May, 1938. It is worth mentioning that both the fresco and the
CRISTIAN POPESCU: THE „ROMANIAN ATHENAEUM“ CULTURAL SOCIETY LAYS THE FOUNDATIONS OF ITS NEW BUILDING

 mosaic medallions of the four rulers and of King Carol I were covered during the Communist period, i.e. the fresco was covered with a curtain over the whole of its length of 75 meters and the mosaic medallions were covered with wooden round-shaped lids. Fortunately, they were saved from being destroyed and they can be admired even today. With regard to the style, the architecture of the Romanian Athenaeum is neoclassical, with ornaments and details specific to the end of the 19th century. This style is typical of most of the representative buildings of Bucharest. This period is highly influenced by the French architecture, by westernization and the boom in the social and economic life of the Kingdom of Romania. The main element of the western façade is the portico with the eight Ionic columns. The triangular pediment placed on these columns is reminiscent of the old temples of antiquity. The inscription “The Romanian Athenaeum” is at the bottom of the pediment. The dome that is behind the pediment is dominant due to its size and its baroque architecture renders it the central element of the construction. The edifice is 41 meters/134.5 high and 29.16 meters/95.66 feet in diameter whilst the dome is 13 meters high. The drum has 20 round windows and each window is ornamented with a stylized lyre. The most prominent part of the dome, at its highest point has a circular skylight with matt windows. Both the dome and the skylight are made of zinc plates as well as their decorative ornaments. The great concert hall is located directly underneath the dome, whilst the monumental hall is on the ground floor. This hall incorporates 12 Doric columns with a metal core set in a circle the access to the concert hall is via four spiral staircases which are impressive due to their size and manner of design and construction. The staircases are set around a main element made of Carrara marble. A new and special element in the design of the staircases is the balcony-landing for stairs which leads to the concert hall. The hall is dominated by the staircase of honour, which was also made of Carrara marble. The staircase has two balusters, one to the left and one to the right side, which start from the landing of the staircase where, between the two Ionic columns, there is the bust of the composer George Enescu, who organised the subscription for purchasing an organ. The organ, made in 1939, is the only large-sized concert organ built by the famous Oscar Walcker and it has been perfectly preserved to this day. The concert hall measures 28.5 metres in diameter and is impressive not only due to its size but also to its decorative elements and graphic achievements. The vault is richly decorated with zoological and anthropomorphic elements made of polychrome stucco work, according to Alexandru Odobescu’s desire. All the decorative elements that create the special atmosphere were made of stucco and finished with an exquisite artistic sense in order to harmonise with the unit they are part of. The main and undoubtedly the most remarkable element of the concert hall is the fresco made by Costin Petrescu. It starts and ends on the two sides of the stage, creating the impression that it embraces the entire concert hall, whilst the 124 light bulbs set at its upper side, make it even more conspicuous due to the discreet lighting. An imposing chandelier with its 200 light bulbs dominates the concert hall from above. Constantin Esarcu, the soul of this project, wanted “the edifice that was solely dedicated to art and science to be monumental”. His wish came true and, even more, the Romanian Athenaeum has become in time the symbol of the Romanian capital and of cultural life.
From the early 19th century, the Romanian Athenaeum building has undergone several stages of repair works:

1. After 1944, probably coinciding with the repair works of 1949, the damage caused by the bombing to the pediment of the portico and the cornice on the Esarcu wing, where concrete capping was discovered, were restored.

2. The second phase of repair work made in 1949, is also important as some brick or wooden floors of the small vaults, over the basement, were replaced with reinforced-concrete floors. This was in the area adjacent to the basement rotunda, both for the wing on Esarcu Street and the wing on Franklin Street, and over the storey of the Esarcu wing. Furthermore, at this stage, intermediary reinforced-concrete floors were added for functional purposes, to both the Esarcu wing and the Franklin wing.

An additional level was therefore created adding to the height of the ground floor, i.e. the mezzanine, though without affecting the initial image of the façades.

In addition, work was carried out on the construction of the reinforced-concrete staircase on the Franklin street side and the circular staircase with access to the basement on the Golescu street side.

3. Based on a design made by Proiect București, with architect Martina Vincențio as manager, the first major work of restoration and modernization of the installations in the building took place between the years 1964–1967, which had dramatic implications for the Athenaeum structure and architecture. In the basement, the current heating station was modernized with completion of both a refrigeration plant and the house water supply plant.

The overall air-conditioning system for the Great Concert Hall and the Small Hall on the basement were carried out, as well as the mechanical fanning of the rotunda on the ground floor and that of the rotunda and the hall on the basement.

An additional storey, viz the storey of the built-in air chambers, was incorporated into the Great Hall. To this end, the level of the hall, the boxes and the proscenium were elevated and the space created was partitioned using concrete walls and separated from the hall by a reinforced-concrete floor.

Due to functional and technical reasons, the first major change in the volumetric arrangement of the Great Concert Hall was made, i.e. the boarded floor was elevated, the proscenium was widened by removing a row of seats, the ceiling of the proscenium was refurbished, etc.

For political reasons, a concrete staircase with separate access to the Romania Box was introduced, whilst the other adjoining boxes were removed.

Also at this stage, the first restoration the fresco and the decorative ceiling of the hall took place whilst the organ was also cleaned.

Furthermore, in the period between 1964 and 1967, the circular staircase made in 1949 was extended, from the ground floor to the last floor. A part of the staircase was suspended using lance poles of reinforced-concrete beams extending into the attic?

A perimeter air duct was inserted on three sides of the building for fanning the walls in the basement, in an attempt to stop the dampness and to improve the circulation of air.

The work performed between the years 1964–1967 may be constructed as an important historical stage as regards the evolution of the edifice due to the complex changes made to the monument. However, the restoration works were limited to the areas destined to the audience, i.e.: the hall, the cloakroom, the official lounge, etc.

4. After the devastating earthquake of 1977, the portico tended to detach itself from the building and numerous cracks occurred in the drum of the dome. As a result, the first consolidation work, designed by engineers Alexandru Cișmigiu, Emilian Țițaru and
Dragoș Badea was initiated on the Romanian Athenaeum, consisting of:

— introducing into the arch of the portico a spatial system of metal beams in order to render its plane stability and to bind the pediment connected to the remaining building using two reinforced-concrete pilasters which were cast throughout the entire height of the building, into the two existing tubes, on the right and left side of the entrance doors;

— completing, into the attic over the great concert hall, a spatial system to reduce the tendency of the drum of the dome to become oval, made up of a circular beam with grates on the outline of the drum and of twenty lance poles, subject to tension in the horizontal plane.

The beam was connected and fastened to the 20 pilasters among the rosettes of the drum of the dome, reinforced with concrete and metal profiles, extending up to and underneath the capitals.

However, after the two successive earthquakes that followed, especially after the one of 1986, a series of cracks reopened in the drum of the dome and further structural damage occurred. The building did not benefit from any improvements to the structure and only local, superficial repairs were subsequently made.
The times immediately after December 1989 remained in the memory of everyone who lived through them as an avalanche of rapidly succeeding events which led us onto unknown paths, often straying, some leading to new targets, others getting stuck in the depths of infinite confusion, disorientation and daily contradictions. Everything that was initiated, be it thought or action, held a certain frenzy for all those who participated. Life was led intensely and intently, each day bringing changes on all levels. Political, legislative, institutional structures were arranged and rearranged openly or covertly. The same applied to the new financial empires that the general population knew nothing about.

An array of journals was read daily, some old with new names, some appearing overnight, with different colours and trends, even contradicting ones, but all governed by that unique principle: the sensational! Everything that was once good was no longer valid. Everything had to be contested, demystified and then purified, both in content and form.

The old institutions and streets changed their names overnight, along with the change of those in charge, regardless of the quality of their activity until then. New skills and responsibilities were being instituted. New times called for (apparently) new people! There was a revolution!

Of course, not even the Philharmonic was immune to these trends, however conservative its activity, in content and form. An air of freedom had settled between the walls of the old Athenaeum. The old administration had been dissolved or had dissolved itself, and the management was undertaken by the members of the orchestra, in the form of a new Union Committee comprised of eleven instrumentalists who immediately got down to business and decided, among others, to replace the former First Leader with the current one (Anca Petrovici), and to accept us – a necessary evil – Mircea Cristescu and myself as permanent conductors. We all convened at “work” on 5th January, 1990, when they were still shooting in the streets, and public transportation was far from operational, which meant that many of the employees came to work on foot every day – still very...
punctual – from great distances, in spite of the snow which had filled the streets soon after New Year’s Day. I remember many of us hugged when we saw each other, tears streaming, as if after a shipwreck. For a moment, all animosity, envy and competition were forgotten. All of a sudden, we had become a real community, a big family aware of itself and happy to be seen as such.

The first concerts of Mozart’s Requiem reunited all the Philharmonic, orchestra and chorus, and were dedicated to the victims of the Revolution. The Requiem was performed four times (on 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th January) in absolutely overcrowded (!!!) halls – where had that large audience come from? – and was recorded live by Electrecord, which eventually released a commemorative LP. It was one of the most moving moments of my entire career. During the first concert, at the beginning of Lacrimosa, I heard a movement from behind me, like an imperceptible rustle. It was the audience, who had spontaneously stood up, paying homage to the ones we had lost. This was repeated during the succeeding three performances. There followed a series of events in accordance with the times, such as: an attempt to rearrange the placement of the musicians based on merit and experience, sometimes marked, of course, by personal incidents. Afterwards, Dan Grigore’s short-lived management was instated, which was full of good intentions, but out of synchronization with the real times we were going through. Meanwhile, February’s main event took place; the Munich Philharmonic was brought to Bucharest, conducted by Sergiu Celibidache, and performed two formidable concerts which once again fully packed the Athenaeum, symbolic concerts which ushered us into a new era.

Starting from May, after Dan Grigore’s resignation, another eight intermediary months followed, which saw the Union Committee govern, with more and more difficulty, seconded by Nicolae Licareţ (vested by the Ministry to sign as a guarantor) and a chief accountant. It was obvious that things could not continue that way. In the meantime, I was approached repeatedly, both by the union and the Ministry of Culture, to assume the position as a manager. The idea itself scared me tremendously. I had no experience in the matter, I had always stayed away from any administrative position and I lacked the economic, financial and legislative knowledge. Those were troubled times, and the risk of compromising my good reputation previously earned, was enormous.

What I also found to be unacceptable was the exaggerated unionist and revolutionary spirit of the Philharmonic, which had risen to new heights, reaching towards chaos and anarchy because of the overt refusal of the majority to conform to any kind of authority.

In short, assuming management seemed self-destructive behaviour to me. In fact, I do not know what made me eventually accept. It was perhaps the desire – great at the time, in accordance with the general enthusiasm – to accomplish something truly important in life. Perhaps, it was the fear of a “foreign ruler” or perhaps the spirit of adventure (?!).

Eventually, at the end of January 1991, I accepted fearfully, taking, however, certain precautions. The first was an internal one, a written convention with the Union Committee, by which I tried to secure their help – and not be hindered by definition, as were the times – in rebuilding a sturdy “scaffolding” in the form of a pyramid, based on
merit, where everyone’s rights and responsibilities were clearly defined and recognized. In this regard, I was greatly helped by Constantin Costache, president of the Union Committee, a man who then proved to be extremely positive and capable, assuming the responsibility of running the entire institution almost single-handedly and doing so quite adequately for a while, in the most troubled period after the revolution. A second condition was fulfilled by the Ministry which specifically requested that Nicolae Lica reţ be nominated as second in command on the basis of the little experience he had already gained, his balanced temperament, his integrity, exceptional intelligence and, last but not least, my fondness for him.

We had an intense period of ingesting the effective legislation, of understanding the mechanism of the institution, of all sort of meetings, of small organizing decisions along with the lines of “catch up as you go along.” There was no time for quiet assimilation, for settling into the position. I had to combine the management, something uncomfortable and against my nature, with my true profession, that of conductor, which I would give up under no circumstances and which, rather unexpectedly and belatedly, was entering a more and more positive stage, due to Romania’s post-revolutionary openness towards the world. I had personal plans, but also projects for the Philharmonic and its home, the Romanian Athenaeum. I was experiencing such an intense burning like never before. I felt polarizing in me the vectors of an unknown energy, yet to be experienced. In the first place, I had in mind to rejuvenate the orchestra of the Philharmonic, and to cultivate its artistic level to the heights of a truly European orchestra, worthy of a capital city, similar in quality and meaning to any of its foreign counterparts.

Then, I wanted to reinstate the Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra, a small elite ensemble which had long disappeared from Bucharest’s cultural environment. Finally, I wanted to set up a great work, which meant renovating the Romanian Athenaeum. Over the years, the building had suffered considerable damage because of earthquakes, especially the one in 1977, because of neglect and lack of funding for culture. The superficial repairs had been done with the same sense of improvisation, of urgency and lack of major interest, as a result of the past attitude towards a building with a character and meaning far too elitist and contrary to the spirit of the times, which was mainly geared towards erecting the People’s House. The walls of the Athenaeum vibrated with the passing of every heavy vehicle; water was infiltrating everywhere, the mural was cracked and in danger of weathering; every kind of installation was either old or out of use; the big stage needed to be widened to be suitable for a contemporary calibre; the concert halls, both the large and the small one needed capital repairs; the staccatos and all ornaments were practically deteriorated; the organ – over 60 years old, added to the big hall thanks to the efforts of George Enescu – was in need of immediate repair. But mainly, the resistance structure was deeply threatened by future earthquakes. Consequently, the musical library, the largest and most precious in all the country had been moved to the basement in 1977, where, because of the lack of ventilation, of the cold and of permanent dampness, had been contaminated by a devastating fungus which was slowly spreading everywhere. The Athenaeum was attracting attention! The building – a symbol of the entire Romanian spirituality – was reclaiming its rights!

I wanted to set up a great work... renovating the Romanian Athenaeum...
devastating fungus which was slowly spreading everywhere. The Athenaeum was attracting attention! The building – the symbol of the entire Romanian spirituality – was reclaiming its rights!
It was an ambitious project, almost reckless considering the precarious economic conditions after the Revolution. The country had so many vital needs waiting in line. Still, perhaps the timing was not that ill-chosen as it had seemed at first sight. Perhaps, that was the time when the Athenaeum would turn into a priority, given that particular time when people were trying to regain a sense of normalcy, to adjust their thinking, mainly through a different vision of values; when the politicians of the day wanted to prove expressly that they were “somewhat different” from their predecessors, that they looked highly upon the cultural phenomenon and invested in it. It was worth trying!
I had inherited a “Repair, restoration and modernization” project from my precursors, a project initiated in Mihai Brediceanu’s time and never implemented for obvious reasons. Generally, it comprised a great part of the necessary restoration work and it could be considered a basis for further discussion, after adequate updating, of course. So much so that, without giving much thought to consequences, I appeared before the Minister of Culture (Ludovic Spiess) requesting that the building site be opened as soon as possible. Initially, the idea was seen as perplexing. Certainly, the project existed; therefore the necessity for intervening had been long recognised. In theory, no one could dismiss it. It was only a matter of finding the money. Seeing the Ministry’s hesitation, I appealed to another strong resort and, thanks to Victor Opaschi, an old friend of the Philharmonic, who in the meantime had become a presidential advisor, I obtained an audience with President Ion Iliescu. He seemed, as expected, extremely open to the matter and intervened, of course within his attributions, on behalf of the project. This was followed by other meetings with the Ministry, in which there were attempts to transfer the project to the city hall authority, the jurisdiction was being questioned, the matter was deliberately complicated and the issue was being shelved. The times were rather tough. In this manner, I could have spent a lot of years before seeing the construction site up and running.
I then had the idea of pushing for the government to use a less orthodox approach, which could have cost the position I did not care much about. Still, since I had already occupied it temporarily, I wanted to try something new during the time I had been granted. I remembered that beautiful period in history at the end of the 19th century, when the Romanian nation had blossomed and thrived. I remembered Constantin Esarcu and the many visionaries that first founded the Cultural Society of the Romanian Athenaeum and then fought for edifying the Athenaeum Palace as the society’s headquarters and the cultural symbol of the entire country.
I remembered their appeal to the people for increasing the funds to build the Athenaeum, under the slogan “One leu for the Athenaeum”. I was aware that the Athenaeum would not be rebuilt with the money of an impoverished people, but, at the same time, I saw the importance of such an action – let’s call it “political” – as it had the potential for great popularity in general and especially at that moment of national dynamism. I was convinced that once the campaign was launched, people would show enthusiasm and, from that point on, no politician would turn away from supporting it.
I contacted Iosif Sava, with whom I had a strong connection, and asked him to help me, after telling him about the President’s support and the Ministry’s eventual approval of the project. He put me in touch with the most important newspapers which immediately ran with the idea. In his turn, he managed to broadcast the slogan on TVR every day, so that for two months (May and June) the media looked to the Athenaeum, under the updated slogan.

The results were immediate and money started to come in, either in our bank account, or directly in the Philharmonic’s pay office. All kinds of people answered the call: rich, poor, young, or especially old. There were at first generous or modest donations. I found Mrs. Rica Stoicescu’s donation extraordinary. In 1995, she donated at the pay office, one million lei (a lot of money at the time, especially for an individual donation!) in the memory of her husband, Dr. Sergiu Stoicescu, and her son, chemist Călin Sergiu Stoicescu. I found equally extraordinary what old Mrs. Maria Brancovici did, who, in 1991, at the very start of the campaign, stopped by the Athenaeum’s pay office and contributed with 10 lei (!) from the pension she had just received.

The effects of the campaign were later invigorated periodically, given the fact that the media’s interest could be powerful, but always short-lived. Therefore, after an ordinary period of stagnation, the well-known slogan continued to appear until 1997. Mariana Nicolesco also strongly contributed, having returned to the country for a while and being determined to help the Athenaeum, by all means. She gave a new impulse to our fundraising campaign, and her personal financial contributions, as well as those of the Romanian Athenaeum International Foundation were of great help then.

With time, the interest in the building kept on growing. Numerous newspapers intervened regularly, refreshing the readers’ memories about a common cause which concerned the whole country while “România Liberă” initiated its own fundraising campaign. In my turn, as a manager of the “George Enescu” Philharmonic, I was always interviewed the state of the construction site, about payments, problems, etc. Natural, but also legal, persons, firms, national and even international associations, members of Parliament, cultural foundations, the Union of Romanian Composers and Musicologists, the Romanian Academy, even the schools...
and high schools in the region contributed to this cause of national interest as much and as enthusiastically as they could. President Iliescu made a habit of visiting the site periodically, so that by showing his personal interest, work would not stagnate. Certainly, the complete list of donations should be published in the near future from beginning to end. Letting them remain anonymous would be unjust and I would not allow it. It would be interesting to note that the categories of benefactors have shifted throughout the years, meaning that the scales has tipped in favour of legal persons, as natural persons have gradually lost their enthusiasm, or perhaps patience or trust.

But I should go back to the beginning. After the campaign was launched, nothing could stop the actual commencement of the work. Ioana Sândulescu was named Finance Director of the Philharmonic, whose primary concern was that the plans ran smoothly. In autumn, work began with a phase of reinforcement, the main designer being S.C. “Proiect București”, led by chief architect Nicoară. The building contractor was SOCED, led by chief engineer Ionel Ciora, and building engineer Ștefan Petroff. Ministry funding was allotted and the completion period was set at the end of 1995. Thus, an endless odyssey was beginning, whose journey I could not forsee at the time. In fact, the construction was completed only around 2003 and SOCED was replaced by Aedificia Carpați in 1996, led by eng. Petre Badea, specialized in restorations and having a great deal of experience in that field.
As work was progressing, the old Athenaeum proved to be just like a patient who, after being opened for a certain operation, revealed many other complications. In the first stage, that of reconsolidation, we dug five or even seven meters below street level, gradually uncovering the over a hundred-year old foundation, which had been built on top of much older ones, shaped like brick vaults and arches of unknown origins. There was extensive concrete underpinning; hundreds of meters of calcified draining pipes were removed, structures of resistance were introduced; a special team of miners brought in from the rest of the country helped with the excavating; the entire canal surrounding the perimeter, as tall as a man, was reconditioned. It was drained and practically reconstructed. After four years of hard work, the Athenaeum was re-laid on a new structure of resistance, capable of sustaining it in case of high intensity earthquakes. This concluded the underground stage, the unseen one, the toughest and most inglorious. We had reached the ground level, where the works could be easily observed. This was the most difficult time for the Philharmonic. The noise, the dust, the general discomfort were bravely endured. During rehearsals dust would fill the rooms, so much so that it was hard to breathe and rehearsals had to be stopped and resumed after the dust had settled. Winter or summer, it was equally hard, both because of the cold and the lack of fresh air. The offices on the ground floor had all been moved into the official hall, which was divided into four or five cubicles connected to the ceiling and you could hear everything that happened around you. Coexisting with the construction site proved to be more difficult than previously imagined. The dressers were doing wonders clearing the dust from the hall and the building in general at the end of the day, so that we could resume our activity the next day, and the audience (which had dramatically decreased in number) could be welcomed under somewhat normal conditions. There were entire periods of time when the continuation of our season was threatened. In order to avoid this, we had to move four times, for whole weeks, to sister-halls, such as those of the Radio, the Conservatory, the Opera, and finally, in the first half of 2003, to the Palace Hall. The lack of funds was felt the most; they were always insufficiently planned or allotted, as a result of the permanent and unforeseen extensions of the works. The site was closed repeatedly, in both stages, due to delayed payments. We needed the major interventions from the Parliament (Adrian Năstase), from the two Presidents, Ion Iliescu and Emil Constantinescu, as well as from the Ministers of Culture, among which Ion...
Caramitru had a special openness towards the Athenaeum. All these years, the work on the Athenaeum was conducted so that parts of the Enescu Festivals, which took place interrupedly in 1991, 1995, 1998, 2001 and 2003, could be held at almost every edition, according to tradition, in the same concert hall known and beloved by the public. They were small site-organizing miracles which outsiders knew nothing about, and which were meant to keep up the appearances of an optimistic normalcy. With one exception: the shadow cast in 1995 by the inability to temporarily return the Athenaeum to the artistic circuit. It was replaced by the Small Palace Hall, which had been restored for this purpose at the last moment, with tremendous effort.

Also in this long twelve-year period, we strived to engage the philharmonic in as many tours abroad as possible, in order to both to clear the site for as long as possible on the one hand and to brighten up the depressing atmosphere which set in when the orchestra spent longer time in the country on the other hand. If I am not mistaken, the philharmonic was engaged in over 30 tours, some more prestigious than others, covering a vast geographic area, from Portugal to Singapore, Korea and Japan. When the work ended in 2003, we entered a new era of stability and peace, in which our ensembles truly found their home and calmness.

Then Costin Petrescu’s mural was restored and the organ was repaired. The recording studio in the basement still needs to be finalized and fitted; the rotunda there needs to be set up as an exhibition hall, according to the plans. These are objectives dear to us, whose completion will restore the Athenaeum to its initial condition, that of temple-palace of the whole thinking and arts in Romania. The lines Alexandru Vlahuţă said in 1890 with the occasion of the 25th anniversary jubilee of the Cultural Society of the Romanian Athenaeum still apply today:

You, who have kept with honour
The holy banner you have raised
And who have set the first stones,
To a palace glitter-glazed,

You can truly be content
And your success is to be praised:
Your dream has / turned into reality
This road has now been blazed!
In 1989, problems arose over the general consolidation of the building and modernization of the installations – both physically and morally worn down – the finishing touches being scheduled after the consolidation. Restoring the edifice was out of the question, due to financial reasons. Preserving the monument required urgent implementation of a project that had to answer to a series of

- material problems (physical and biological degradation of the edifice) and
- methodological problems (the activity of the “George Enescu” Philharmonic could not be interrupted during the work) and conceptual problems (the building’s seismic resistance needed to be enhanced, without modifying the nucleus of the building, comprised of the foyers and the great concert hall).

The initial general consolidation project developed by Dragoș Badea și Silvia Caraman comprised the following restoration elements:

**FOUR TUBES OF STEEL CONCRETE** in the lateral wings of the nucleus, from the basement to the last floor, with foundations for extra stress, connected at the rear façade and portico;

**REPLACING THE WOOD PLATFORMS** with concrete steel ones;

**CONCRETE REINFORCEMENT OF THE BRICK BOLTS** in good conditions, and replacement of the damaged ones with steel concrete platforms, with the metal profiles included in the structure of the new platform;

**EXECUTING A MOISTURE-RESISTANT CONCRETE BELT AT THE BASE OF THE WALLS**, along the building, to eradicate dampness and stop the biodegradation process; continuing the canal along the perimetre, at the main façade, under the portico;

**CONSOLIDATING THE TAMBOUR OF THE CUPOLA:**

In 1992, once work began, we discovered, in collaboration with Florica Berinde, PhD. in Biology, **BIODEGRADATION OF THE MASONRY, OF THE CARPENTRY AND OF THE BOOKS** in the library, and an active attack from *Merulius lacrymans* and *Poria vaillanti* in the basement, the perimeter canal and the ground floor, on the carpentry and the masonry, and from *Lenzites abietina* on the wood elements on the ground and upper floors.

The measures undertaken to stop these attacks were:

**FOR THE CARPENTRY** – eliminating the contaminated elements and replacing them with healthy timber, impregnated with fungicide and non-wash and non-toxic products;

**FOR THE MASONRY** – depending on the degree of contamination – either stripping, jointing and applying fungicide with a high degree of diffusion; either destroying the bricks and mortar in a 30 cm radius around the affected area and replacing them with steel concrete (as was the case of the basement wall, toward the main façade);

**FOR THE BOOKS** – applying smoke treatments.
As a result of the joint efforts of the beneficiary and the planner, the project expanded and became a consolidation, restoration and modernization project in 1992, divided in two distinct stages: preservation works (consolidating and eliminating the biodegradation) and actual restoration works.

It should be mentioned that in this project, the nucleus, preserved by the conservation method, was not included in the restoration works; at the very most, some conservation works were stipulated, to revitalize the colour, where necessary, in the foyers and the hall. The reason for this? It was, of course a financial one, but I should note it was 1992.

Only about five or six years later, the project for the restoration and modernization of the great concert hall was drafted at the beneficiary’s request, which was approved by the Ministry of Culture, and it was only four years after that we settled the execution details for the hall and for the restoration and consolidation of the cupola.

As the consolidation work, the stripping and various restoration studies advanced, the consolidation details from the initial project were completed, adapted or modified according to the real situations observed in situ.

Additional consolidation interventions were necessary:

- consolidating the columns of the portico with a “metal corset” along their height, connected with the partial consolidations from 1977;
- consolidating the pediment and its cornice, replacing the wood platform with a concrete platform, tied to the coating of the tambour of the cupola;
- consolidating the cornices and taking the areas made from heterogeneous elements, metal sheet, wood, plaster, cement, Rabitz plastering on the slats, resulting from numerous stages of repairs, and replacing them with steel concrete beams or such elements (the cornice in the Golescu wing was integrated in the building’s general consolidation system, as a connecting beam between the Franklin and Esarca wings);
- reconditioning of the wood framing with a high degree of physical and biological degradation;
- reconditioning of the ventilation system under the two halls in the basement, correlated with architectural and ventilation projects;
- assessing the platform of the basement rotunda made of radial metal profiles and brick bolts, consolidating of certain walls, arches and pillars, consolidating of certain areas with old, inaccurate and degraded finishes and breaking wall cavities for piping.

The restoration and remodelling in the areas affected by the consolidation were carried out in accordance with the functional needs of the Philharmonic and in accordance with the alterations and later additions, which were understandable, as the functional needs had also evolved over so many years.
Next, I will try to give a brief overview of the developed, modernized and restored areas that the Athenaeum now uses, by classifying them according to their direct beneficiary.

AREAS INTENDED FOR THE PUBLIC

- the basement rotunda – foyer and area for occasional exhibitions, with a buffet and public restrooms
- the small concert hall with sound management, in the basement, in the Esarcu wing, intended for chamber music concerts
- the ground level coat room, in the Esarcu wing

AREAS INTENDED FOR PROTOCOL

- the official salon, with its own foyer and restrooms, situated on the first floor, in the Franklin wing
- the chambers for soloists and conductors, with their own restrooms, situated on the first floor, in the Franklin wing

AREAS INTENDED FOR THE PHILHARMONIC

- study halls situated on the ground floor, in the Esarcu wing, and both on the ground floor and mezzanine, in the Franklin wing
- a guest apartment – ground floor, Esarcu wing
- men and women’s dressing rooms – mezzanine, Esarcu wing
- chorus rehearsal room – first floor, Esarcu wing
- orchestra foyer – first floor, Esarcu wing
- library – first floor, Franklin wing
- restrooms
- recording studio, situated in the basement, but left unfinished

AREAS INTENDED FOR THE MANAGEMENT

- offices – ground floor, in the Franklin wing

AREAS INTENDED FOR THE ADMINISTRATION

- offices on the ground floor and mezzanine, in the Franklin wing

TECHNICAL AREAS

- situated in the basement, in the initial locations
- a new ventilation system for the chorus rehearsal room, situated in the adjoining attic
The meticulous research of the archives conducted by our team before planning began, failed to uncover documents or photographs that could confirm the original manner in which the lateral wings were modelled. As previously shown, these areas suffered the most alterations.

After the consolidation, in the coat room and the official salon, we reconstructed an intermediary period in the evolution of the edifice (1964-1967), by adapting the wall and ceiling decoration, as well as the marble flooring of the coat room, to the new dimensions of the space. The reconstruction was based on the detailed survey carried out before the work began, as well as on the moulds and colour samples collected before the stripping.

Another reconstruction operation took place in the rotunda in the basement, both inside the perimeter and the nucleus, but with many more innovative elements, so as to complete the ambience of the place and to adapt it to the functional requirements of an exhibition space. I could mention the general lighting fixtures, wall lights, decorative ceiling made of painted glass reinforced on a metal frame, as well as the specially designed furniture intended to give personality and functionality to the space. Unfortunately, just like every furniture project, it remained a project.

For the rest of spaces in the lateral wings, I opted for an atmospheric and innovative restoration, as I had no information about what had been there in the past and the new functional requirements of the philharmonic.

All the space arrangements made together with architects Ana Braniște, Doina Marinescu, Gabriela Mindu in the lateral wings of the Athenaeum can be included in the restoration work just because we worked on a monument. They are in fact contemporary architectural creations which needed a special approach, individual to each case.
RALUCA NICOLĂ: A PROJECT OF GREAT MAGNITUDE BROUGHT TO A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION

reconstruction of
the basement rotunda
When the project began, where the former and current small hall was situated, there was the library, heavily infested biologically, with wood-framed panelling and canvas on the walls. What I noticed then was the plaster soffit with a flowery pattern, which masked the ventilation shafts, and the golden plaster decorative grill, which were a product of the intervention in 1964-1967.

Our architectural work began from the desire to include the small concert hall in the same stylistic context as the nucleus, by borrowing decorative elements from the great concert hall – the twin pillars from the stage’s panelling, as a way of modelling the encased ceiling – and creatively adapting the existing decorative elements.
Consolidating with NIBR solutions for the acoustic treatments resulted in a painted wood frame panelling and silk mirrors which could mask the various acoustic treatments needed for the concert hall, in order to conform to current sound requirements. We applied the same concept to other rooms that needed acoustic treatments, namely THE STUDY HALLS AND THE CHORUS REHEARSAL ROOM. Similarly, in both these cases, the oak or sycamore framed panelling and the mirrors made of veneered or silk-lined plywood mask various acoustic interventions, conferring a unitary look to the spaces.

...and in the study halls and chorus rehearsal hall
We tried to bring the management office zone, which had been treated quite simplistically, to the elegance and prestige of the position, aiming to establish a stylistic unity with the other rooms, as well as with the guest apartment, which had been treated in a similar manner, only in a different colour palette.
The stylistic approach to the two great rooms on the first floor – the library and the orchestra’s foyer – is modern, based on the contrast between the massive structures of the split level and the transparency of the metal staircases and railings.

The orchestra’s foyer posed certain problems by being very tall and having no decorations – except for the encased ceiling. Also, for functional purposes, the work space required expanding, as there is so little in the Athenaeum. This led to the idea of a split level, accessible through a light metal staircase, as a result of which, the entire space was remodelled, gaining new functional and aesthetic properties.

When dealing with the passage areas – corridors, entrances and stairs – we drafted them as buffers between spaces with different purposes. By borrowing some simplified elements from the nucleus, creatively adapted according to the space, the ground floor corridors, connected directly to the rotunda and the semi-circular hall, were decorated with plaster mirrors with figured frames and cornices. The protocol entrance from Franklin Street and the artists’ entrance and stairs from Esarcu Street were both decorated with bossages.
Given that the nucleus had been preserved by the general consolidation of the building, including the decorations of the semi-circular hall and of the rotunda, only the colours required to be revitalized. The restorative painter Silviu Petrescu was to research the adherence of the existing coat of paint and its compatibility with the types of paints available, as well as to ascertain the original colour through stratigraphic research.

After installing the scaffolding in the semi-circular hall, together with the constructor and the restorative painter, we noticed that certain structural intervention was needed, which could not have been identified visually.

As such, there was local consolidation of the gallery wall, replacing the decorations and other pieces of rotten wood on the gallery ceiling, as well as consolidation of
the ceiling’s support elements with metal profiles. These solutions were permanently related to the real situation observed after uncovering and the results of the laboratory analyses of the pieces of wood.

Restoring the complex decorations of the semi-circular hall and the rotunda needed careful examination of all the ornaments so as to assess the type of intervention: reconstruction, re-anchoring or local repair, reconditioning or reconstructing the marble elements (pillars, columns, etc.)

We restored the decorative painting after talking to the planner and the restorative painter after the conclusions of the stratigraphic research and after creating samples approved by them.

The floral paintings on the ceiling of the semi-circular hall and the glass were also restored by painters. There was also intervention above the organ, by restoring the air vents and the decorations, improving the overall image of the hall and disposing of the 1964-1967 interventions.

The work was constantly monitored by the planner and the restorative painter and was conducted with great accuracy and professionalism by Aedificia Carpați, the general contractor, thus giving the halls their original glow and chromatic.
Restoration of the original decorative mosaic from the halls and the semi-circular gallery, as well as the marble staircase was made by applying mastic to the colour of the mosaic and by polishing the marble, thus reconstructing the continuity, the beautiful paintings and chromatic.

The light fixtures, present in both the rotunda and the semi-circular hall, were also restored, the glass bowls being replaced by new ones, edited after the original model.

New light fixtures were made for the gallery, in the spirit of the ones in the halls.
The decorative glass ceiling was restored by replacing the damaged panes, painted after the existing model, and reconditioning the vertical mobile panes. After checking the metal structure of the ceiling, we inserted additional rods to reduce the curvature of some pieces.
The unending problem faced by the Romanian Athenaeum, that of financing, led to the postponing of the works in the great concert hall from one year to another, starting in 1996, when the technical plan had already been devised and approved by all the competent forums.

The work on the great concert hall required that all concerts and repetitions of the Philharmonic stopped, which demanded a timely execution and full financing. This became possible in autumn 2001, when based on the documentation completed by PROJECT BUCHAREST, the general contractor AEDIFICA CARPAȚI, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the Ministry of Finance and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development granted a loan conditioned by the completing of the works on the hall and the cupola by the opening of the „George Enescu“ International Festival in 2002.

The structural interventions on the great concert hall were determined by the need to restore the original configuration of the hall, which meant expanding the stage with a new concrete platform and restoring the platform of the new boxes resulted from removing the access staircase to the main box. In the area of the air chambers beneath the hall, there was partial coating of the portico, adding to the previous general coating of the cupola.

The restoring of the great concert hall, a monument with complexly decorated ceilings and walls, required careful mapping and examination of all the ornaments by the contractor and the planner so as to assert the necessary intervention for each element, depending on its condition: reconstruction, re-anchoring or local repairs.
The restoring of **the decorative painting** was in accordance with the instructions given by the planner and the restorative painter, after cleaning tests for dust and smoke residues, establishing the most effective cleaning manner and after the restorative painter’s stratigraphic research of the paint to identify the original colours.
The work was constantly monitored by the planner and the restorative painter and was done with great accuracy and professionalism, giving the hall its original glow and grandeur, through a discreet and unostentatious intervention.

All throughout the work on the decorative ceiling, the fresco was protected, being restored at a later date according to the conservation and restoration project by ELSE DESIGN.
The wood panelling on the sides of the stage and the access doors were restored *in situ* with alterations to the opening system of the doors from the gallery so as to allow pianos to be carried in.

The forestage was re-outlined so as to broaden the stage area.

For the curtain, a new drawing manner and operation mechanism was devised.

**Bringing the installations** up-to-date posed certain problems regarding their blending into the Neo-Classic-Eclectic decorative ambiance.

**The lighting of the hall and the stage** entailed the following: updating the candelabra for a greater number of light sources, restoring the floral decorations around the light bulbs for optimal technical and aesthetic functions, placing pendulums to lighten the stage and support beams for the spotlights without affecting the decorations on the ceiling and the stage, as well as adapting the lighting spaces on the ceiling.

In order to improve ventilation in the superior part of the hall, alterations were carried out on the central element of the rosettes on the decorative ceiling, so as to enlarge the outflow area without affecting the altogether image of the rosettes.

For the ventilation, decorative grills were built in the panels at the back of the stage while basing the grills at the edge of the stage on the new design.

Moreover, the air chambers were cleaned of dust, disinfected and the flooring was soundproofed.

The two functional compartments of air inflow and outflow were updated after the new ventilation project.

One of the important requirements of the theme was the preserving of the specific acoustics of the room.
even after the restoration and modernization of the facilities. For this purpose, both the design and execution were assisted by the INCERC specialists who took measurements of the original material finishing and of the prototype-samples of the new materials added to the building.

**The furniture of the hall was reconditioned** with materials tested and approved by NIBR. The final measurements made by NIBR showed that the measures proposed and undertaken to lower background noise of the ventilation led to its diminishing to barely perceptible limits.

The two technical annexes of the stage were also upgraded.
restoring the circular staircases

new globes based on the model of the original ones

At the same time, the circular staircase was also consolidated and restored.

The walls were consolidated according to the project, improved after the uncovering through site reports, with details for the cornices, medallions, alcoves, old covered gaps, embedded pieces of wood and others.

The windows at the top of the stairs were replaced with smoke hatches.

The lighting fixtures on the stairs were restored and new light bulbs were made to match the original design. The restoration followed the same stages and approach as the other heavily decorated areas.
Our consolidation, restoration and upgrading project also included the restoration work for the façade of the Romanian Athenaeum.

Considering the physical degradation caused by the passing of time, as well as the moisture and degradation of a large area adjacent to the cornice caused by poor maintenance of the drain pipes, the uncovering of the façade in the field areas was required. The decorations were verified by the contractor and the planner, element by element, the solutions for restoration being selected from case to case, according to the level of degradation, going as far as reconstructing them from castings.

The carpentry was reconditioned where the physical condition allowed or re-edited according to the existing one. The foundation and the portico were coated with Vratza stone, chromatically similar to the Sân Dominici rock powder used to finish the façade.

The outer stairs leading to the entrance to the Athenaeum were restored with massive blocks of Vratza stone.
RALUCA NICOARĂ: A PROJECT OF GREAT MAGNITUDE BROUGHT TO A SUCCESSFUL CONCLUSION

doubling the original metallic structure
with a new metallic structure

THE CUPOLA. The problem of consolidating the cupola had been put forward since 1992. Throughout its analysis, NIBR was called in to establish the properties of the metal in the structure of the cupola. This study was finalized by determining the quality and properties of the steel, as well as the possibility of keeping the structural ensemble functioning at that time.

Since 2001, there has been water infiltration in a number of places, with an important flow, which causes in certain situations (rain outflow, angle) infiltration in the great concert hall.

The mineral wool has also suffered degradation and water impregnation, thus we can assume these areas also feature degradation of the skeleton.

Following examination of the samples gathered from the material of the cover (zinc sheet roofing) by an expert firm (Metallurgical Research Institute) so as to assert the physical mechanical and chemical qualities of the existing zinc sheets; resulted in the need to replace it completely in the field areas.

S.C. PROIECT BUCUREŞTI S.A. developed an expertise on the structure of the cupola regarding the degree of resistance according to the prescriptions and the calculations in effect at the moment.

Given the wearing of the material in over 100 years of activity (1887 – the year of construction), a complete consolidation was recommended together with the restoration of the cover and the works on the great concert hall.

The consolidation works consisted of doubling the current metal structure with a new metal structure, made of 20 arches over the existing ones, connected by a ring and crossbars and replacing the damaged wood parts.

The metal rods were tripled in number to support the decorative ceiling of the hall. Anti-corrosive protection was applied to all of the metallic elements of the cupola, the grilled beam of the ceiling and the metal support structure of the floor. Fire-proofing was improved by applying thermofoam paint to all metal pieces, part of the existing structural ensemble of the cupola, as well as the new support
Restoring the cover entailed:

– stripping and replacing the existing zinc sheeting in the field areas, with linear elements
– stripping and cataloguing the elements of the decorative arches and replacing the damaged elements by creating models of the existing ones
– checking, stripping and replacing partially or completely the decorative elements (counter forts, festoons, etc.)
– replacing the wooden skeleton supporting the decorative elements.

Restoring the covering

rods of the decorative ceiling. Fire-proofing the wooden pieces of the cover, floor and stair was accomplished by building four smoke hatches at the top of the cupola cover.

According to the NIBR project, the inner part of the cupola was thermal and sound proofed.
Bucharest at that time. Some famous figures include Ballu, who designed Hôtel de Ville in Paris and the Palace of Justice in Bucharest, Paul Gottiereau and Galleron, who designed the Romanian Athenaeum and part of the Cotroceni Palace.

It’s the time of the French eclecticism and the Athenaeum borrows enough elements specific to the period, but still keeps a certain stylistic sobriety, which is especially due to the architect’s care.

In fact, we cannot really compare the Athenaeum to anything; it is neither a mausoleum, nor a tomb. It was meant to become a pantheon of Romanian culture and a symbol which has yet to be surpassed to this day. It is a symbol of Bucharest and Romanian culture.

C.S.: Does the Romanian Athenaeum resemble anything from Romania or abroad: the type of building or the type of construction?

D.L.: It is a dome-type building. We could compare it with a lot of buildings that have existed and still exist in the world. In his inauguration speech, Odobescu presents all the buildings that the construction of the Athenaeum was based upon. It was mainly the Pantheon in Rome, one of the oldest ancient buildings still around, then the Mausoleum of Halicarnas and other mausoleums, and of course, the Pantheon in Paris.

But the shape of the building is somehow a coincidence, because it was built on top of the foundations of a circus, with a circular, dome-type construction.

This was due to the French influence in general, and that of the French school of architecture in particular, which was quite predominant in
C.S.: What state was the Athenaeum in when you started the work?

D.L.: The Athenaeum had become an archaic building, but not stylistically. It was mainly because of neglect. Not to mention that it had been through a bombing, through all the major earthquakes in Bucharest, which had left their mark. The fairly serious interventions in '65 and after '77 had only improved its appearance. A major intervention needed to be initiated. A very complicated endeavour, the major intervention meant consolidation.

On the one hand, with all the knowledge we have today about the type and characteristics of earthquakes in Bucharest, simulations to assess resistance were made and on the other hand, we planned out intervention so that it barely touched the decorative parts and it stayed invisible as much as possible. This required a great amount of work, not only for the planning, but for the execution as well, because it was, as we put it, a restoration “little by little.” To make all the serious and heavy interventions to the structure needed behind the frescos and decorations – this meant special meticulousness and strong collaboration between designer and builder. It also meant great intellectual effort, as planning a restoration meant planning continuously, planning on site. It is almost like a surgeon’s intervention, who, as he makes progress, discovers new aspects of the disease and tries to eliminate the tumour and all the adjacent complications...

Thanks to working on this house, we had the opportunity to have on our team absolutely wonderful people, some who have disappeared, from the old Romanian architectural school. For example, those who had G.M. Cantacuzino as a teacher, people from whom we had learnt a great deal, exceptional structural engineers and specialists from almost all fields.

This was because the Athenaeum needed beyond the structural and architectural interventions, a serious reconsideration of the sound quality in the hall, of anything that meant acoustics. In fact, we updated all the functions of the building/house, bringing them up to today’s standards, but with extra care so that the interventions are visible as little as possible, discrete and, at the same time, they can allow for the technology to be replaced with the latest one, when it becomes necessary.

“...It is truly a great joy and a very good omen, when we have the opportunity to observe that the aesthetic instinct, the tasteful and harmonious shapes, colours and sounds, strongly ignite the minds of our public. Thus, we begin to hope that those bleak and villainous objectives of daily life will disappear from our midst: to live plentifully and naïvely on money earned by the head and shoulders, or to rattle one’s mind with the individual use of the budget of self-restraint.”

Alexandru Odobescu, The Romanian Athenaeum and ancient buildings with a circular dome, conference held on Sunday, 14th-26th February 1888, at 20:30
C.S.: Could you describe to me such an intervention with major implications on the specific activities – I am referring to the concerts – in the great hall of the Athenaeum?

M.S.: One of the simplest requests was, apparently, extending the stage. The stage was really small, built on a wooden platform, covered in plush. They requested for its expansion with a steel concrete structure.

C.S.: Was concrete poured right there inside the hall?
M.S.: Yes, the stage was expanded by approximately a meter, a meter and a half, advancing towards the hall, on a concrete structure which supports the metal profiles of the existing ceiling, made from brick bolts.

C.S.: The bolted ceiling remained and concrete was poured on top of it?
M.S.: The bolted platform remained; a thin layer was poured on top of it, another platform, on which
the seats in the hall rest, and between the initial brick bolted platform and the concrete platform there are ventilation ducts which were lined with canvas cushions, filled with mineral wool in order to improve acoustics.

C.S.: How many are there?

M.S.: Over 1800 small cushions cover the walls of the air ducts, at various heights, to improve acoustics.

T.O.: The ventilation chambers start from the basement and all their walls have been lined. We also put a mineral wool mattress with aluminium foil, so that small impurities are not let out from it, because we found a lot of dust gathered in the space between the horizontal bolted platform and the oblique one where the seats and boxes are arranged. It was the same under the stage. Cleaning the curtain also meant a lot of work. Tons of dust was taken out from the old Athenaeum. On the one hand, there was the dust I was telling you about, from under the seats and the stage, which always gathered in the old air ventilation system and on the other hand, there was the cleaning of the curtain by a specialist cleaner.

C.S.: The curtain was taken down? How much does it weigh?
M.S.: A few tons… It was taken down and restored.

C.S.: All this renovation, consolidation and restoration initiative was certainly logically and efficiently thought through, in stages. What was the success-ion of the operations?

M.S.: We started with the consolidation work. The first stage, the external interventions stage, when we worked on restoring the external decorations, was made by Aedificia Carpați. The previous interventions through the years used different materials, and that is why a serious intervention was needed, accurate through the stylistic unity and the homogenous behaviour of the material. The façades were restored with stone dust, which meant the restoration of the exterior decoration, but also the consolidation of the walls in ducted systems which could withstand the horizontal strains caused by an earthquake.
restoring all the decorations on the façade
This also was an extremely laborious stage, but the most difficult interventions were the interior consolidations. For example, we noticed fissures in the hall, especially on the frescos, X-shaped fissures. Of course, we could not intervene with the consolidation towards the hall, because the mural painting was in danger of degradation and so we worked from the outside, from the area of the four circular access staircases, which are like four towers opposing each other. The staircases were completely uncovered to the bricks and consolidated by injecting the fissures with special pressured cement, by stitching the fissures with steel cleats and covering with armoured coating, with a superior, top quality mortar, armoured with concrete steel netting of horizontal and vertical bars.

After completing the consolidation work, we moved on to restore the original finishes, after samples were collected in situ and multiplied by plastering with the help of the workmen.

Another major consolidation was made to the drum of the ceiling.

On the perimeter, vertical reinforcements were made, connecting the superior belt supporting the ceiling of the cupola.

D.L.: A seismic gasket was specially created to absorb the shock caused by earthquakes. The four staircases are basically four tubes supporting this gasket.

All these interventions were made only after careful cataloguing of each valuable decorative element which required special protection. Wherever possible, we tried to keep as many as possible of
the original materials, and used the same type of material when we needed to replace them.

C.S.: Vă rog din nou să îmi dați un exemplu concret.
D.L.: For example, the Carrara marble steps of the access staircases. We didn’t replace them. They were tamped and completed with the same material through classic methods. I would compare this to filling a tooth… Such an operation requires a certain finesse, science and greater skill than making a new step.

M.S.: The steps being made from a single block, there were cases when they were fractured, cracked in half. The fissures were injected with epoxidical resins and other materials, with which the broken elements of the steps were welded so that their resistance was restored, which was very important as they descend one in the other and are self-supporting. When the walls were uncovered to consolidate the stairs, the entire scaffolding along the stairs could not be leaned against the steps which were fissured and broken. We had to make special gaps on the sides, to build metallic scaffolding on top of which we built the final scaffolding. Therefore, the scaffolding was not set against the structural resistance of the stairs.

C.S.: You must have had very skilled craftsmen.

M.S.: We did, especially regarding the interventions to the stucco marble. There are many decorative elements – banisters, railings, pylons, columns,
Interventions to the stucco marble structure of the material should be, but the craftsman is the one who gives it the warmth, the glow... Not to be misinterpreted that this material is a replacement for marble! It is just as precious as marble and costs just as much.

C.S.: It costs just as much?

D.L.: It is. This material has an extraordinary heat. It was invented in Roman times and has always been attributed to Italian masters, It was adopted by Neo-Classical architecture and it is very spectacular. It perfectly resembles genuine marble, but can be used for an entire column, for example.

If marble calls for stereotomy in the case of columns, stucco marble allows them to be made from a single block.

M.S.: Which is very important for the overall chromatics of the entire ensemble...

D.L.: We were lucky enough to have on site craftsmen who were handed down the secrets of stucco marble from father to son, from ancestors who learnt from Italian masters who worked on this splendid Bucharest at the turn of the 20th century. There is this tradition in Bucharest, but there are very few who mastered this secret as it entails extremely precise work, in which the architect always intervenes, because he has a more developed sense of art and knows exactly how the duct of a vein should look or how veiny the inner pedestals – made from stucco marble and we had to redo them because they were damaged, chipped, broken, fissured. Stucco marble is a material which recreated the look of marble, but is made from plaster with various colouring added to its mass...
D.L.: A square meter of stucco marble requires hundreds of hours of labour, because it needs to be constantly puttied, polished, puttied, polished over and over again which otherwise won’t have the same translucency characteristic to marble, and it would be an opaque material, like plaster, for example.
C.S.: The restoration work is a true art! And restorers should be sensitive and skilled artists.

D.L.: Something amazing happens when you restore. I can honestly tell you that buildings have souls. Working inside those walls, it is impossible not to find this soul in the material, which forces you to intervene in the same way you would in the case of a human being. Any harshness, especially where the Athenaeum is concerned, would have been impossible, would have caused a dissonance which would have been felt immediately. The building has a kind of emotional radiation, like in churches, where all the prayers seem to be imbued in the walls.

It was almost impossible not to feel a special vibration every time you approached the cupola of the Romanian Athenaeum. This is something that has always moved me about the structure and the building of the Athenaeum. The box between the exterior cupola and the interior one is practically a void. The hall’s visible cupola is...
supported by thousands of pendulums attached to the exterior cupola. The feeling you get is, this void works like the inside of a violin, creating a particularly special sound. Otherwise, it is good to know that the hall would have much better acoustics if the dome hadn’t had a fresco, but a material to reflect less of the sound. However, no one is affected by this problem because the Athenaeum has somehow warm and welcoming in itself.
I noticed that foreign artist on the stage of the Athenaeum let their gaze wander from time to time to the cupola. With its decorations, this cupola is based on one of the important halls of the Louvre, which was an inspiration for Galleron.

C.S.: A hall in the Louvre was the inspiration for the decorations of the cupola of the Athenaeum?

D.L.: Yes. The tritons and all the decorations of the cupola are modelled after a hall in the Louvre. Of course, a lot of these elements are Neo-Classical and can be found in ancient Greek architecture.

C.S.: Do the tritons and the other decorations of the cupola have certain significance?

D.L.: The deep, archetypical significance is that the tritons protect the place from unfortunate occurrences.

M.S.: Sitting on a chair and listening to the music, you fail to realize the ornaments of the cupola of the Athenaeum are larger than us. Their appearance is impressive and these ornaments are made from wicker.
C.S.: I was told that all those decorative elements on the ceiling are anchored in the attic…

M.S.: They are. We noticed that the ceiling decorations, which are, as I said, large, are detached from their support from place to place. The support is made from cane and reed, tied to the metallic structure of the ceiling which is connected to metallic beams. We anchored these large decorations with zinc steel cleats, to the metallic structure above. Practically, we didn’t attach them to the support behind them, which was in danger of detaching. The intervention took place without introducing new, sound-reflecting materials and keeping the old construction system with strands of reed in columns, capitals, plasters and large decorative elements. We re-anchored them.

C.S.: Did you really re-anchor all the decorations?

M.S.: Yes. Each piece was re-anchored and re-injected with a plaster paste with bone cement, so as to bond in time. After re-anchoring the decorative pieces, we re-plastered the surfaces between them, and the painted areas were treated with a solution of carbon ammonia to uncover the original paint. A lot of places were dusty, smoky, oxidised and didn’t have the original paint anymore. We cleaned until we revealed the initial coat of paint and used it to match the colour of the new paints. We did a sample yoke and called the planner and the Directive for Architectural Monuments to approve that what we had done is identical to what used to be. After that we started to paint the entire ceiling. There is a great deal of things which were thought of and added. For example, we gave up the bronze and brought in special paints from Italy, which would not oxidise.

C.S.: What does a yoke mean? A section of the ceiling?

M.S.: A section with all the characteristic elements duplicated and repeated. When painting the ceiling, we used top quality paints, fast-dry flax oil and polymer paints which don’t shine, reflect sound or light, but absorb them.

C.S.: Did you bring the paints from Italy, too?

M.S.: No, they were ordered here. They are restoration paints we use regularly. They were prepared in the same hues we asked for. These paints were not only used in the hall of the Athenaeum but also for the honour staircase and the hallway. The dyeing was restored to the entire building.
re-anchoring and restoring the ceiling decorations
C.S.: I would like to go back to what you were saying earlier, that if it hadn’t been for the fresco, the acoustics would have been better. I don’t understand! Why?

M.S.: First and foremost, The Romanian Athenaeum wasn’t planned as the headquarters of the Philharmonic from the start. The “Romanian Athenaeum” Society was created to promote the arts and science in general. That’s why, not even the stage was built too large at first. It was measured for what the hall was designed for.

C.S.: For conferences rather than music.

M.S.: For conferences, chamber music, recitals, and less of a home for the Philharmonic. That’s why when we started the consolidation and restoration, we looked not to damage the acoustics of the hall, but to improve it. Especially since the hall has an organ and organs are designed for rectangular hall, not circular ones…

C.S.: Are there still any circular concert halls in the world?

M.S.: There are, but modern ones…

D.L.: Yes, there are when the theatre hall is also the opera hall. Italian theatre halls, like the one in Cluj or the Garnier Opera House in Paris, are from the same period and somehow resemble the Athenaeum.

M.S.: Like I said, to intervene so as to improve the acoustics of the hall, we had to turn to the experts from NIBR.

C.S.: Pardon the interruption! What does NIBR mean?

M.S.: National Institute for Building Research. They have conducted a lot of studies which involved musicians with a perfect ear, besides the state-of-the-art equipment. Special audiograms were done so as to find the best solutions. Because, at a given moment, for example, advancing the stage with a meter and a half under the cupola created a double effect which reverberated for the musicians in the front. Well thought corrections were needed to keep the acoustic comfort. What made matters more complicated was the dome which reflects sound…

C.S.: Do you mean the fresco?

D.L.: Yes, the fresco has a reflective sound surface. It would have been better if that surface had been made from an absorbent material to gather the sound and silence it from multiple directions. However, what helps is the fresco material. The fresco – al fresco – is made from fresh plaster. But this plaster is made following the old technique, following the recipe. This recipe contains hemp and textiles, which are mixed with lime, washed thoroughly to create a Roman mortar. Thanks to this textile structure using hemp in the structure, the wall has absorbent qualities. Otherwise it would have been a disaster…

Everybody is convinced that the Athenaeum in Bucharest has perfect acoustics. Well, that’s not exactly the truth. The best hall in Bucharest is the Radio Hall, which was built following the modern standards for good acoustics. The Athenaeum, on the other hand, for its symbolic value and because it was the pride of this city, had
changing the finishes of the furniture with materials that had been acoustically verified to be carefully adapted for its role as home to the Philharmonic. And this intervention finally allowed a thorough scientific approach to this problem. The Athenaeum now has improved acoustics and sound quality was greatly improved with some construction solutions and the installation of state-of-the-art equipment.

M.S.: We had to change the finishes of the furniture – the chairs and the screen between the enclosures, with new luxurious fabric, but this also had to have certain acoustic properties beside the fact that it had to be the same colour as the original. We acquired the fabric from England and selected it with regard to the studies conducted by NIBR on the acoustic properties of the material. We also changed the finishes of the floors; the old linoleum was removed and replaced with ‘parquet flooring’; the old linoleum was damaged, ripped, worn out and had to be replaced with a new material to match the acoustic requirements of the hall and until the new material was selected, we tried various samples.
D.L.: Another difficult intervention was the making of the stage lighting. We studied such interventions carried out in Italy and France. We needed spotlights to lighten the stage without clashing with the style of the hall. It shouldn't look like a remote control left on a Louis XV commode! The entire lighting system of the hall is from the iGuzzini company, one of the best lighting, architectural lighting enterprises.

C.S.: In what language is that?

D.L.: It’s the name of an Italian firm. We could have also opted for Philips or a French firm. All these were studied and we eventually chose these lights because of the architect, who reached the conclusion that these had the required discretion.

C.S.: Actually, what was the purpose of this extensive work? How should we call it: renovation, restoration, consolidation?

M.S.: Consolidation, restoration and upgrading.

D.L.: It was basically rejuvenation. It was a general intervention which allowed this rejuvenation. This intervention was made to give a few hundred years of youth to this beautiful building.

C.S.: Let’s get back to the fresco.

D.L.: Restoring the fresco was made a year after all the other works ended. It was done in great silence, with the hall functional, bit by bit. It meant consolidating the coating first through the required injections, especially in the most affected areas. In a few areas you can still see the damage made
by previous earthquakes and the bombing at the end of the war. There is also a famous photograph of the Athenaeum where German soldiers carry their luggage and the cupola is bombarded. The restoration was thorough, with a team led by another Petrescu, who is related to the one who did the original fresco, Costin Petrescu, and it was carried out with great knowledge and care by a team of great monument experts and fresco restaurateurs.

First, the area was cleaned and the painted sections were identified in the same day, because the plastering for a fresco is made for what will be painted that same day, which means the shape of the painted area worked on a certain day is related to the composition. It is also known that for this fresco, Costin Petrescu didn’t work alone, but he was helped by students – under his guidance, of course. There are a lot of hands and even more kinds of lines, so every section of the fresco had to be investigated, mapped and treated differently. We worked carefully on the sticking and the washing of the original fresco, the additions were very, very subtle, and in my opinion, what we achieved was a huge gain, the fresco looks like a valuable painting which kept its patina and at the same time gained the freshness of restored colour.

C.S.: We started from the ground up, but what about the innards of the Athenaeum? Did you also work on its foundation?

M.S.: We made a canal similar to the one at the Central University Library, a ventilation canal
around the perimeter, greatly beneficial to drainage and preventing dampness and water retention, which can influence the foundation with time.

C.S.: You didn’t work on the foundation?

M.S.: We didn’t work on the nucleus. Four tubes of steel concrete were made for the sides of the nucleus, from the basement to the last level, with foundations to absorb excess strain.

D.L.: Basically, a highly elastic structure was created, capable of absorbing all the effort caused by the horizontal strain generated by an earthquake. The problem is not the foundation. The foundation of the Athenaeum is a circular foundation which behaves well in case of an earthquake. It is a very solid foundation.

C.S.: You started to speak about the decorations of the façade and we got sidetracked and went on to a different subject. Could we, please, go back to this subject?

M.S.: We found on the façade decorations made from plaster, argyle, Roman cement and mortar cement. These elements made from different materials react differently to various factors like shifting temperatures, trepidations, etc. and then cracks occur around them.

D.L.: Clearly, the interventions through the years used different materials. In the back, the materials were poor and the work was rushed. They probably had exhausted the funds or everything had to be finished as soon as possible, in a hurry imposed by something, we don’t really know.

M.S.: Usually, the first mortar applied has to be of superior quality and the mortar of the final layer – less so. While uncovering, we found areas where the opposite was the case, superior mortar was applied over an inferior one. This having a smoother area and more cement, also has greater contractions which leads to fissures, and peeling off of the support layer because the support layer is weaker, it does not adhere to the structure. In addition, there were damp areas because there was no draining canal. As I said, this was only discovered now.

With so many problems, it was decided that all these decorations be taken down and that the consolidation of the walls be done first, with ductile netting to absorb the horizontal charges of an earthquake, and then the decoration be redone uniformly with stone dust. We worked with stone dust with cement adhesives which had a steel structure, armouring of anchoring cleats, which are welded to the structural elements of the house and then cemented with mortar. Thus, they are ensured by both the armouring and the adhering to the structure of the house. The façades were not painted and it was unitary work.

D.L.: The material of the façade is coloured in itself. The colour is inside the material from which the plasters and decorations are made, in its depth, so there is no need to spoil it. This intervention let us restore the façade as required and thoroughly, all around.

One last intervention: the exterior lighting was also extremely important. We are now pleased to see
this house at night, in all its splendour, thanks to experts in lighting. In the old days, daylight would come into the hall through the dome, and you could see the lights in the hall at night through it.

C.S.: The Athenaeum was initially gas lit?

D.L.: That’s right, and through a false lighting, we could keep this warm atmosphere given by gas light and seen at night through the panes of the dome. Although the panes are now covered – we had to get the air tubes behind them, as well as above the candelabra.

C.S.: A journalist is a journalist. I ask you to share with us a special memory or a moment of desperation or the best feeling…a hand to hand combat with the problems you were first defeated by and then conquered…
...the chandelier in the middle of the cupola has the height of a man!...

D.L.: The strongest emotion was when I got up on the stage. The inner skeletons hadn’t been mounted yet, only the candelabra had been taken down from the middle of the cupola, which, seen from below, looks like a toy. It was on the stage and when I climbed next to it, I could see it was my height!
At that moment, I remembered all the concerts and the presence this edifice has and I had a strange feeling I was the child from Andrei Rublev, from Tarkovsky’s movie, the child who says: “I know how to make this bell”. It is a great thing to receive such challenges…

M.S.: A great fear I had was when we did the forest of scaffolding in the hall because, working on the ceiling, we had to have a general floor made from folded metal sheet and planks which had to be very stable…Seeing those tall towers, over 20 meters in height, I said to myself: “God, will this
...after the scaffolding was taken down, the ceiling appeared to be truly majestic...

hold?”, because we couldn’t set the scaffolding on the ground or on the foundation, they were only on the floor of the hall. We had an urgent meeting with the planner, to make a quick calculation, to see if we could start building the scaffolding. Of course, there was no problem and we build the scaffolding and the structure.

And I felt great satisfaction when the scaffolding was taken down, the ceiling appearing to be truly majestic, with brighter, cleaner colours...

D.L.: What helped us a great deal was that when we started working on this house, we were working with a team that had a feeling of déjà vu, because we had been working for years with the same people restoring the Central University Library
and some of the problems and requirements already had solutions. Meaning, the Athenaeum wasn’t our first training school. We had already been trained for difficult restorations and it was obvious, because there are moments when you have to make fast and clear decisions and know decision makers, you have to go at it. It can be the Monuments Directorate, the structural engineer, the sound engineer, or you have to find quick solutions which can be reversed when the expert comes. Experience is very important in these kinds of situations and it matters a great deal to work with a team formed over so many years. There are basically twenty years since we have worked on restoring important buildings in the city centre.

C.S.: Which were these buildings?

D.L.: The National Art Museum – the former Royal Palace – the Central University Library, the Athené Palace Hilton Hotel, the National Bank of Romania, the Art Collection Museum on Calea Victoriei…We had an opportunity, but also a great responsibility.

C.S.: Aedificia Carpaţi gained this work through an auction, a competition? Do you remember if it had an opponent?

D.L.: One thing is certain. For works of such prestige and magnitude, there is no one who could ensure the quality, finesse and accuracy of the work with a simple specialization. There are, however, teams of masters, craftsmen, engineers, who cannot be
formed in only a few years or even a generation. These teams are formed throughout the years, as they gather experience and are “broken-in”, and can be traced back from restorations made in Communist times, at the Cotroceni Palace, the Snagov Palace, the Foşor Palace in Sinaia, for example, or Peleş Castle in Sinaia, as well as the maintenance works on distinguished buildings which have to be renovated constantly. One of these is the Central Military Circle. The same teams also worked on restoring “Carul cu Bere”...

C.S.: They were all teams from Aedificia Carpaţi?
D.L.: Yes.

C.S.: Did the Aedificia Carpaţi also work on the Cotroceni Palace?
D.L.: Yes. We are talking about years of experience which has been handed down to guilds you can hardly find nowadays, not only in Romania, but all around the world. This was a great opportunity, because such works would have entailed twice as much human and financial effort. We would have had to bring experts from around the world and it would have been a complex and difficult task to coordinate the work of so many teams. Yes... it should be noted that the Aedificia Carpaţi joined this project not only with enthusiasm and skill, but also with financial support for a large part of the works, and they got back their investment much, much later.

C.S.: It was then when Aedificia Carpaţi sold one of its properties?
D.L.: It was, in the end, the best thing to do. Without this financial support from the contractors, we probably couldn’t have done the restoration or could have started just now. You do realize that every passing year leaves its mark on an untended house.
M.S.: Now that the facade has been redone, it can be easier to maintain. It doesn’t need to be whitewashed, it just needs to be cleaned, because, as I said earlier, the materials we have worked with on the facades is coloured.

D.L.: Something that is absolutely necessary now is to maintain the anti-bird system. Especially at the entrances, so that the splendid mosaics there wouldn’t be dirtied by pigeons anymore. There are some spike systems, very discreet networks which can protect the monument and are used at a large scale around the world. When the restoration was underway, however, we barely saw them in other countries, but now they’re everywhere.

T.O.: Because we have been working on the houses around this plaza for so many years, we know very well that all the street concerts that are organized here are extremely bad for them. There are massive constructions that unacceptably vibrate because of them.

D.L.: That’s right. The same thing happens at the Black Church in Brașov because of the festival there.

T.O.: And now, after we finished the work, there are drug addicts in the attic! They raised the roof trap doors to get in, left them open and it rained in the attics...

C.S.: But how did they get on the roof?

T.O.: They used the fire escape on the side of the building. The trap door cover is rather large; it’s a wooden cover wrapped in metal sheeting. One man alone can’t lift it, it’s very heavy. They lifted it, couldn’t hold it anymore and let it go; the cover glided on the roof and punctured the chute and that’s why the columns have problems. After lengthy discussions, we removed the steps nearest the pavement, and we kept cutting more and more. We couldn’t believe they could climb so high. In the end, we cut the steps at a convenient height so that when the fire department came, they could reach them from their truck... A year ago, right across the road, the “Cina” restaurant caught fire also because of drug addicts.
We’ve been having problems with them since we were working on the site. They pulled down the copper drains and sold them. Copper sheeting is very expensive. We replaced them four times.

D.L.: The restoration team leaves these houses with a maintenance manual, with instructions on how to maintain them, which is already imposed by Romanian law. The Ministry of Culture has a department which keeps track of monuments through the years, after they have been restored, thus imposing certain requirements on owners, which they hope to be carefully monitored. It is a long-term responsibility, for the few monuments still standing...

What is important is that now the entire Athenaeum complex is, I think, a proud part of Bucharest. All the works necessary to reach this goal were made with great effort, by highly specialized teams and by extremely devoted individuals, in a time when everybody discussed politics in the streets of Bucharest and few people thought that there would come a time when they would have to contribute and to redefine our values and identity.

The beginning of this redefinition led to the restoration of those few monuments that we have been left with, after so many previous attempts this city has gone through, and to keep them in good condition in the future.

THE END
The Athenaeum is the symbol of Bucharest. Built 120 years ago, the building at the heart of the city is now - and seems to have always been – the headquarters of the "George Enescu" Philharmonic. We could have recalled the fantastic history of the Romanian Athenaeum by leafing through yellowed pages and following the certainly interesting path from past to present. However, we chose a different path which leads from the present, through the past, towards... the future. We suggested a travel through time, an adventure where you are led by those who worked on restoring the monument in the past, the craftsmen, the artists who, by restoring the building, the roof, the decorations, the interiors, the fresco, the organ, etc., have come to know it so well and detailed that they seem to be able to talk incessantly, with knowledge and emotion, about this true and unique temple of Romanian culture. We thank them!

Cristina Sârbu

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