

THE THEME OF THE PRODIGAL SON'S RETURN IN CLASSICAL MUSIC I: CLAUDE DEBUSSY

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SUMMARY. The 34th Sunday after the Pentecost is one of the most important in the liturgical cycle of the Christian Orthodox Church, because it is the second Sunday of the Triodion. In connection to this topic, so profound and rich in theological, moral, musical, and human implications, we investigated areas of interest in the history of the classical music of the past three centuries in search for guiding points to approach this topic. The work signed by Claude Debussy is the best known and most valuable of those presented, which is why we think it is necessary to focus on it from an analytical point of view.

Keywords: pray, Triodion, impressionism, religion, faith

1. Introduction

The 34th Sunday after the Pentecost is one of the most important in the liturgical cycle of the Christian Orthodox Church, because it is the second Sunday of the Triodion. "Apart from these elements which belong to the sacramental life of the Holy Church, the Triodion must represent, at a personal level, a period of consecration. It is a time where everyday worries should occupy a secondary place, and our spiritual efforts should intensify in order to prepare for the great holiday of the Resurrection of our Saviour Jesus Christ"². It is particularly important as its name refers not only to the prodigal son, but also to the prodigal son's RETURN (with emphasis not on his reckless and proud leaving, but on the contrition and humbleness of admitting his mistake and trying to straighten his life).

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² Pintilie, Nicolae, *A început perioada Triodului* [The Triodion has commenced], <https://doxologia.ro/taine-ierurgii-slujbele-bisericii/inceput-perioada-triodului>, 22 February 2016.

The whole Triodion period is full of references to special conditions of spiritual intensity, by feeling an acute pressure of time - passing to the moment of Judgment: "the time runs, take it, my soul!"³.

At the basis of the parable is the text of the Book of Luke 15: 11-32: *And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'*⁴

³ Makarios Simonopetritul, *Triodul explicat* [Triodion explained], Deisis, Sibiu, 2008, p. 49.

⁴ The Holy Bible, the English Standard Version, at <https://www.biblegateway.com>).

2. Musical Works on Theme

In connection to this topic, so profound and rich in theological, moral, musical, and human implications, we investigated areas of interest in the history of the classical music of the past three centuries in search for guiding points to approach this topic. "In the context of the abundance of information around a certain subject, any approach is faced with the effort of developing original themes and, above all, with the natural pursuit of finding an unsuspected path in the scientific plane".⁵

The best known and the least performed musical works devoted to this topic include:

a. Claude Debussy, *L'enfant prodigue*: lyrical scene (scène lyrique), on the text by E. Guinand, written in 1884. The work is part of the vocal-symphonic creation of the great French composer, with an initial vocal version of the score. The composition was revised in 1907-1908 when the complete score is dated. Certain sections (*Prélude, Cortège et air de danse*) were arranged for piano four hands in the year of the first version (1884).

b. Serghei Prokofiev, *L'Enfant prodigue* Op 46:

c. François Auber, *L'enfant prodigue*: comic opera in 5 acts, which was first published in 1850.

d. Andre Wormser, *L'enfant prodigue*: pantomime in 3 acts

e. Pierre Gaveaux, *L'enfant prodigue* Op. 28: vocal symphonic work in 3 acts, whose first audition was on 23 November 1811. The librettists are François Louis Riboulté and Jean-Marie Souriguère de Saint-Marc. The work was written in French and the orchestration includes soloist voices, choir and orchestra (the classical composition, with trombones and harp).

f. Stephen Heller, *Fantaisie et Valse sur 'L'Enfant prodigue' d'Auber* Op.74

3. Claude Debussy: L'Enfant Prodigue

The work signed by Claude Debussy is the best known and most valuable of those presented, which is why we think it is necessary to focus on it from an analytical point of view. The following section of this paper will be devoted to the other creations mentioned above. In the following pages we will attempt a semantic approach to Debussy's music on this subject; we think that this approach favors the argument of the paper. "There is a clear

⁵ Rădulescu, Antigona, *Perspective semiotice în muzică* [Semiotic Perspectives in Music], Ud. UNMB, București, 2003, p. 1.

divergence between a referential and a strictly syntactic approach to music: the dispute created by the emotional-cognitive relationship is present in any attempt to include music in both categories: languages and signs”⁶.

The lyrical scene created by Claude Debussy opens with an introductory fragment, based on a flowing topic, specific for impressionism, with two components: a first musical cell based on an ascending and descending tone made up of four diatonic sounds (of equal duration), followed by a second musical cell (which proposes a different rhythm and melody, formed of small unequal leaps, dominated by a sound related to the modal universe). This introductory motif is played by the wind instruments (which accentuated the impression of an airy, transparent setting), the musical discourse starting from a simple melodic play, repeated more and more often and by more and more voices: thus, the discourse becomes crowded, more expressive, and this sonorous and semantic crescendo is supported for the bow instruments by the cumulative repetition of certain specific formulae.

The theme in itself is revealed upon returning to the First Movement (I Mouvement), played by the horns and subsequently developed by the entire group of wind instruments, proposing a timber (thus an associated semantic universe) specific for the idea of memory, of remembering. The section *Tres expressif et un peu anime* entails reproducing the theme mainly with horn instruments, which gives music a melodic generosity, a sonorous amplitude specific for the sonority of the composition. After a first climax, on mark 4 of the score the introductory motif is repeated, confirming the atmosphere of calm, quiet and freedom which characterizes the first scene – depicting the two boys’ quiet life at home, with their father who takes care of them, living in harmony. The element from the Book of Luke associated with this musical fragment is: *there was a man who had two sons* (Luke 15:11...) – this is all that is said about the harmony between the father and his sons. The character of the mother is absent from the parable, but she is present in the French musical version.

Mark 5 of the score signals the first change in the atmosphere and music, though the intervention of the mother, Lia: mark 7 is introduced at the first climax of the score when she talks about *douleur involontaire, Lia pleure toujours l’enfant qu’elle n’a plus*. At the melodic level this is a romantic-like construction, which ends dramatically on the sound in 2 (*retenu, avec beaucoup d’expression*), played in a recitative style.

⁶ Banciu, Gabriel, *Muzicologica* [Musicological Works], Ed. Media Musica, Cluj-Napoca, 2006, p. 5.

For example, mark 8 of the score (*Andante non troppo*) signals the beginning of Lia's air, which starts with a double summoning of the name of her beloved son. Thus, Claude Debussy does not insist on the moment of the departure, presented in the biblical fragment of the parable of the prodigal son: *And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.* (Luke 15:12...).

From the dramatist's point of view, the chosen solution is very important for the entire meaning of the composition: the moment when the (potentially) less wise son (the younger) asks for the fortune to which HE IS ENTITLED is implied. By invoking the father (so aware of the fact that the person being addressed has not only fortune, but also, more importantly, love to give), he asks what he has, what can be given and taken; he is not thinking of the being (to be), but of the fortune (to have), the degradation being visible from this initial moment. The composition also presupposes the attitude of the father, who is generous and freedom-giving, he divides his fortune fairly between his two sons without asking why and to what end. NOT AFTER MANY DAYS (lacking patience, the younger son leaves quite soon) the younger son takes EVERYTHING and travels FAR AWAY: this are the premises of the mother's pain and the prodigal son's failure. The consequences arise: the *reckless living* (in fact, sinful, morally degrading) is a consequence of these gestures which are placed under the sign of PRODIGALITY (a very complex poetical and theological concept, deserving of a separate study).

The mother's grief (air) begins by invoking the departed son (*Azael! Azael!*), using formulae which are open at the melodic level, interrogative, sequential, resembling the Wagnerian style (see the prelude to the opera *Tristan and Iseult*). The mother's rhetorical question obstinately permeated the entire composition: *pourquoi m'as-tu quittée?* Mark 9 on the score (*Très calme, mais sans lenteur*) brightens the scene by remembering the serene moments spent with the children, with God's blessing.

Andante non troppo

A - zaël! A - zaël! Pour - quoi m'as tu quit - té - e?..

p

p

p

p

p

Div.

Debussy, L'Enfant prodigue, Lia's aria

At mark 13 of the score, the discourse is accelerated through the rhythmic repetition of the name of the son who has left the family nest (tempo stringendo). The mother's tone acquires a recitative, dramatic nature, and the rhetorical question at the beginning of the work is sung with the indication *avec desespoir*.

Simeon's intervention precedes the arrival of a merry suite, with children bringing flowers and fruit, running around full of smiles and good cheer: *Air de danse (doux et gracieux)* puts forward a tripartite (da capo) instrumental interpretation, with an impressionist orchestration, mellow yet rich (flute, harp, wind and bow instruments in a medium and acute register), interpreting a fragment of oriental inspiration, strongly highlighted at the level of meter and rhythm. Azael remembers his brother and sister watching the happiness of the children playing (*ils sont hereux!*, intoned on a descending phrase and rubato which signals the melancholy, the regret).

His air intensifies this state which reminds him of the lost purity of the soul, of the closeness of his mother's heart, of the innocence and happiness of his former life. The musical discourse supports the soloist's text, the instrumental score includes elements that indicate tension:

exceptional meter and rhythm divisions (duolets), the tremolo performed by the bow instruments, unusual asymmetrical accents, short and unpredictable phrases: all these accompany the trouble in the prodigal son's life after his departure from home. The discourse returns to its initial coordinates, allowing the development on generous ample romantic coordinates (while remembering of the good old times).

Sans force et sans courage: this is the emotional state which brings about again the dissonant troublesome discourse of being far away from home which has exhausted all of his resources. The perspective of dying is so overwhelming that he calls God's name in prayer (mark 30 of the score). The image of the mother awaiting her son occurs again (the replacement of the father in the parable is interesting), as she sings her despair *expressif et douloureux*. The musical discourse which accompanies Lia's voice is more dynamic, flexible, more modern, revealing a different inner time of the action. Her mother's love can even imagine the son's real suffering, as he becomes *seul et faible*.

Mark 32 on the score signals the moment of the prodigal son's return home, as a poor wretched traveler; upon recognizing her son, she calls him to life in an impressive duet (*Andante*, mark 33 of the score), in which the voices of the two protagonists sing both in succession and in unison. The son asks for his mother's forgiveness, but the answer remains shrouded by the love which has nothing to forgive. Simeon's father finds his son after the mother has exonerated him in the family, welcoming him home and begging for the father's forgiveness. Simeon sings his air *maestoso*, with the conclusion: the prodigal son has returned!

The father's conclusion is worthy of his faith as the one who was able to wait for his son, without hope, but also without despair: "Heaven will send us an unexpected blessing". The son's return is viewed as a holy gift. The work concludes with a trio of the main characters who sing their gratitude to God.

Conclusion

Debussy (considered in history as "the most important composer of his time"⁷) reveals, in this composition which deals with a religious topic as well, his innovative qualities in musical discourse concerning the harmony (tone and mode, specific to French music in general), rhythm, texture and shape, but also the melody (tributary to his attachment to the oriental exalted modal sonorous universe).

⁷ Schonberg, H., *Viețile marilor compozitori* [The Lives of Great Composers], Ed. Lider, București, p. 436

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