

THE SACRED IN THE CHORAL WORKS OF DRAGOȘ ALEXANDRESCU

AUREL MURARU¹

SUMMARY. Standing at the crossroad between tradition and modernism, the choral work of composer Dragoș Alexandrescu represents a genuine symbiosis between “the national” and “the universal”. The presence of his choral works in choir concert programs and in the church choirs' repertoire places Dragoș Alexandrescu on top of the list of creators of music dedicated to the development of the Divine Liturgy, next to other representatives of the genre from the second half of the 20th century.

Keywords: Sacred music, modality, polyphony.

Since the late 19th century, the liturgical, pluri-vocal chanting of harmonic-polyphonic type has been marking the history of Romanian music, becoming one of the most important forms of the professional musical art. At the core of this type of chanting, there have been both the psaltic monodies of Byzantine origins, as well as the choral tradition borrowed from Russia and the Western countries, thus resulting in an original branch of our country's musical culture.

Sadly, the period of full bloom of the sacred music genres only lasted until the mid of the 20th century. As the entire Romanian culture from the second half of the 20th century had to incur restrictions and censorship, there were few composers who took the chance of creating music designed for the Divine Liturgy. Although there has been an evident attempt to discourage any form of manifestation of religious faith, Nicolae Lungu managed, in full communist era, to edit his two “*Liturgies*”, which were works of high artistic value, inspired by the work of his predecessor, Dumitru Georgescu-Kiriac. Although he failed in publishing his works at that time, there were many other composers (among whom - Dragoș Alexandrescu), who never gave up creating worship music.

¹ Univ. Lecturer, PhD – Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Department of Social and Human Sciences, Spiru Haret University, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: aurelmuraru@yahoo.com

After half a century of staying “out of the spotlight”, liturgical music was offered the opportunity of manifesting on all the levels of the cultural life, being present – ever since the 1980^s – not only in churches, but also in concert halls. Over the last twenty years, important choral works have been published, pertaining to the sacred music genres, as the sacred has remained “a constituting part of the creation of most Romanian composers of today”². Beginning with the last decade of the 20th century until present, several liturgical works of a definite value have been written, such as: “*The Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*” by Liviu Comes, “*The Wallachian Liturgy*” by Tudor Jarda and, last but not least, “*The Divine Liturgy Chants*” by Dragoș Alexandrescu.

Dragoș Alexandrescu (1924 – 2014) was attracted by sacred music ever since he was a child – at the age of 13, he composed *Cherubic Hymn No. 1* (in D minor), a work that was performed by the choir of the Episcopal Cathedral in Constanța in 1937, under the baton of conductor Constantin P. Demetrescu – the religious component becoming the main aspect of his entire work. The presence of choral works signed by Univ. Prof. Dragoș Alexandrescu in choir concert programs and in the church choirs' repertoire places him on top of the list of creators of music dedicated to the development of the Divine Liturgy, next to other representatives of the genre.

His rich practical experience, a well-developed vocal and choral intuition, the understanding of the nature and expressive possibilities of the human voice – all these qualities have reflected into “*The Divine Liturgy Chants*”, turning this opus into a genuine masterpiece of today, a masterful blend between tradition and modernism. Shortly, the work was soon included in the repertoires of several church choirs, and this is mainly owed to the atmosphere of full piousness, permeating the entire liturgical music signed by protodeacon Dragoș Alexandrescu. In his work, entitled “*Church Choir Director's Guide*”, Alexandrescu states: “The role of sacred choral music, as well as of monodic music of Byzantine tradition, is to be sung in church, accompanying the development of the most beautiful, religious dramatic representation: The Divine Liturgy”³.

In the sacred choral works of this composer, the melodic component is extremely accessible from an intonational standpoint, giving the sound discourse the natural fluency, specific to a music designed for a religious service. The directing of the voices is governed by the principle of smooth

² Valentina Sandu-Dediu, *Muzica românească între 1944-2000 (Romanian Music between 1944 – 2000)*, Editura Muzicală Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, page 84;

³ Dragoș Alexandrescu, *Ghidul dirijorului de cor bisericesc (Church Choir Director's Guide)*, Editura Sfântul Gheorghe-Vechi Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, page 10.

movement, as the voice carrying the melody is usually placed in a comfortable, advantageous vocal range. The gradual movement, inserted with small leaps, is very frequent in Alexandrescu's work, generating a cursive and fluent melodic pattern. For the most part, the profile of the musical phrases is ascending, as if aspiring to spiritual enlightenment and to divinity.

E. g. 1



Having an in-depth knowledge of the prayer's text, Alexandrescu preserves the primordially of the melodic element as carrier of the emotional force, giving birth to some musical jewels which speak first to God and then, to the humans.

The clear and airy harmony of Alexandrescu's liturgical works evolves in tight relationship with the syntax, creating stability and thematic unity. One can firmly state that the liturgical part of his compositional work is predominantly *polyphonic*, as he employs a wide array of techniques, from simple imitations to musical segments written as a *canon*, or in the style of a fugue (*fugato*).

E. g. 2



Pe Tine te lăudăm (No. 1) (Translation: "We Praise You, Lord!")

By processing the melody of the *Trisagion* in Tone 5, *Dragoș Alexandrescu* uses the *canon* as a compositional technique, conferring this work a special fluency, very appropriate for such a composition.

Sfin-te Dum-ne - ze - u - le, Sfin-te ta - re Sfin
 Sfin-te Dum-ne - ze - u - le, - Sfin-te ta - re - Sfin
 Sfin - te Dum - mne - ze - u - le, Sfin - te ta - re
 Sfin - te Dum - ne - ze - u - le, Sfin - te ta - re

The oscillation between *major* and *minor* (not necessarily in the relative keys) is extremely often found in the works of the Dobrogean composer. Through this apparently insignificant compositional technique, the composer marks the various hypostases of expressiveness, as a game between lights and shadows, between joy and sadness. The *major-minor* relationship, eloquently illustrated in the “*Litanies*” (after “*the Holy Gospel*” and the “*Cherubic Hymn*”), is enhanced by the Picardy cadences with which Alexandrescu ends “*The Holy Anaphora*”, “*We Praise You, Lord!*” and “*The Lord’s Prayer (Our Father)*”.

The harmony of his choral works of sacred music represents the perfect fusion between *tonal* and *modal*. In addition to his compositions, in which the rules of the tonal-functional system are strictly complied with, we can find numerous opuses that pertain to the *modal* sphere of influence (*The Orthodox Paschal troparion “Christ is risen!”*, *The Beatitudes (No. 1)*, “*Troparion of the Holy Cross*”, and so on). One of the liturgical works in which we can notice the composer’s mastery in integrating the *melos* of Byzantine origin into the most adequate harmonic ambiance, is his processing of the psaltic melody “*Christ is risen!*”. By finding the type of harmonization required by the melodic line and building up natural chords on the scale degrees of the mode, by avoiding tonal relations and excluding the leading tones, Alexandrescu manages to emphasize the musical substance of this *Paschal troparion*, while maintaining unaltered its *modal* character. The psaltic melody of this work fits within a chromatic hexachord with a semi-augmented 2nd (put into practice through an augmented 2nd):

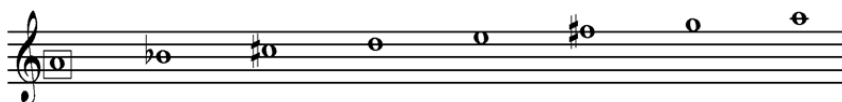
E. g. 4



Chromatic Hexachord extracted from the Tone (octoecho) II scale

Hence, by adding the seventh note to this hexachord, Alexandrescu reached the scale of the folk heptatonic mode (a Mixolydian scale with lowered 2nd), built on the note *la*.

E. g. 5



Mixolydian scale with lowered 2nd

Starting from this scale, the composer managed to create a choral work in which all the elements of harmony can be rediscovered in the melodic line, resulting in one of the most original works signed by Dragoș Alexandrescu.

Although apparently evolving in key Gm (with *Sib* and *Mib* in the key signature), *The Beatitudes (No. 1)* are yet another example of a work with a pronounced *modal* character. The *modal* imprint can be easily detected from the very first musical segment, which is built on a continuous oscillation between the functions of *tonic* and *subdominant*, as the relation specific to tonal music (dominant - tonic) misses from this debut fragment of the work. An overlapping of the two systems (tonal and modal) is attained through the 11 inner cadences found in this choral work. Hence, all these cadences are built on the V – I relation (specific to the tonal system), yet achieved through the minor 7th and not through the leading tone, which turns them into genuine moments of equilibrium between the two sound organization systems.

The creation of Dragoș Alexandrescu stands at the crossroad between two trends of influence: the Byzantine influence, on one hand and the Slavic-origin trend, on the other. This dualism, which has proven fertile for Alexandrescu's work, has manifested through a synthesis between national and universal, between tradition and innovation. The confrontation between *modality* (specific to church chanting) and his formation as a composer educated in the tonal-functional Western spirit, has resulted in an opera in which the originality in expressing the psaltic ethos has not been lost.

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