

INTERPRETATIVE ISSUES IN CHURCH CHORAL MUSIC

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SUMMARY. The present endeavour aims primarily at emphasizing the issues related to the interpretation of Orthodox liturgical choral music. Although, at first glance, the music of the Divine Liturgy seems to be just another art of sound, in reality it goes far beyond the limits of a “simple” work of art. The religious sermon can in no way be compared to a concert, with performers and listeners. The parishioners are not merely an audience from a concert hall, but, together with the priests performing the ceremony, they participate organically and actually to the development of the religious sermon. Hence, it is important to become aware of the fact that, in the Christian cult, the chanting is not merely decorative, but it accompanies and continually deepens the important moments of the divine service.

Keywords: liturgical music, choral music, conductor, performance.

Although, nowadays, church music is getting more and more appreciated, a lot of concertgoers, musicologists, composers, performers or conductors perceive this music merely as a simple work of art, which they look at from the perspective of its aesthetic value. Hence, numerous so-called “liturgical” scores have surfaced over the last few years, from which “the sacred” is totally absent, or, worse, we can find various performances of some outstanding religious works in which the divine aspect is simply overlooked. This has resulted in a desacralization of the liturgical chant. Sadly, we can notice that church music – especially the choral one, but many times even the psaltic music of Byzantine origin – is distorted, sometimes even repudiated by some singers or conductors of church choirs. It is a *Sine qua non* condition that the music accompanying the Divine Liturgy not only instil a thrill of aesthetic gratification, but also permeate the souls of the Christians attending the sermon, bringing them closer to God. During the Orthodox religious service, the choir, located in the choir stall, is meant to create a mystical climate, specific to the divine worship service, which would

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favour the spiritual enlightenment of the Christians attending the sermon. This ought to represent the primary concern of not only the composers, when writing an opus of church music, but also of the conductors of church ensembles, whose primary purpose is to create the adequate atmosphere for a worship service. In this regard, Gheorghe Şoima talks about the missionary function of liturgical music, meant to awaken the minds and hearts of the lost: "in the churches that have good choirs...the people that come to the Divine Liturgy are not only fervent Christians, but also certain indifferent persons who love music. At first, some are drawn to the church only by the beauty of the music; then, gradually, they begin to like the evangelical teachings, as well as the religious atmosphere within the church and, in time, they become religious, as well".²

If the aesthetic enchantment may be aroused fairly easy (through generous melodic lines, through dynamic and agogic contrasts, through spectacular harmonic progressions or special timbralities, etc.), the atmosphere of devotion and deep meditation can be created only through an intense and authentic emotional experiencing of the liturgical act. This is why, the music performer – whether a choir member or a conductor – must interpret the sacred chant (regardless of whether in the church or even in a concert hall) as a prayer, as a "fruit of the lips" (see *Jews* 13, 15 or *Hosea* 14, 3), as an organic part of the ritual or reaffirming of the Christian faith, as a form of prayer, as an offering brought to God All Mighty. In this regard, both the conductors and the choir members must be ceaselessly connected to the liturgical service and continuously interact with the ordained celebrant of the Divine Liturgy, in making a collective prayer, "borrowing" from the priest's grace and pouring it – through the sincerity and profoundness of the musical performance – onto the participants in the Divine Liturgy. In this endeavour, the choir members must start from the premise that "in the church, one cannot sing just about anything or anyhow";³ First of all, they all must be fully aware of the liturgical moment in which they must perform one song or another, bringing to light the deep significance of each, separate chant. This is what king and psalm writer David used to say: "*Sing with understanding!*"⁴

The conductor of the church choir must also keep in mind that the music they are interpreting represents one of the aspects of our communication with God and that the participants to the Divine Liturgy are establishing a

² Gheorghe Şoima, *The Functions of Liturgical Music*, Publishing House of the Theological Magazine, Sibiu, 1945, page 64;

³ Titus Moiescu, *The Religious Choral Creation*, "Muzica" Magazine, Issue No. 2 /1994, page 128;

⁴ *Psalm Book*, The Publishing House of the Biblical and Missionary Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 2001, Seventh Psalm Section, Psalm 46, page 92;

tight connection with the Kingdom of God precisely through sung prayers. *“If people can get closer to one another spiritually through music, then it is music that can help people also establish a communion with God. Just as music expresses longing or love towards another human being, it can also manifest man’s longing or love for God”*.⁵ Therefore, the performance of church music must be tackled as a ritual of initiation into the true faith, as a joy of the soul, as a celebration of the virtues that God, the Creator, in His great mercy, has bestowed upon us.

Any musical work, from the simplest psaltic monody to the most ample vocal-symphonic opus-es, entails that the distance between the creator (composer) and the receptor (an audience or a congregation) be made through the performer (the conductor). We must admit that the success or failure of a musical creation largely depends, at the same time, on the quality of the performance, because the true art of sound emerges only when it is auditory intercepted by the audience, as *“music is dependent on the execution by the musician”*.⁶ This is why, in the following pages, we have set out to tackle the issues facing the performance of one of the most profound and moving genres of choral art: *the Orthodox Church music*.

From the very beginning, we must make a clear distinction between the two categories of Orthodox liturgical music, which differ in both the compositional technique and the interpretative one: *lectern chanting* – which is monodic, of Byzantine tradition and *choral music* – which is harmonic and polyphonic, originating either from a psaltic melody or from the composer’s imagination and sensitiveness. However, I would not absolutize the differences – not at all negligible – between the monodic chanting of Byzantine origin and the harmonic choral singing, because, after all, these both directions of establishing Orthodox church music have proven their value and perennially, withstanding the harsh moments of dictatorship and being present today in our lives, with notable results in both directions. Hence, we can firmly state that, regardless of the influence, the music that accompanies the texts of the Divine Liturgy outlines profound states of an authentic religious experience, which, in the simple text, whether read, scanned or recited, may not always find an adequate effect. In this regard, the theologian and the composer Gheorghe Șoima stated: *“the religious poetical texts deprived of music may cause monotony and fatigue”*.⁷ The choir expressively intensifies the texts of the prayers used during the Divine Liturgy, thus beautifying the sermon through artistic or musical means, in particular.

⁵ Gheorghe Șoima, *op. cit.*, page 49.

⁶ Nicolai Hartmann, *Aesthetics*, “Univers” Publishing House, Bucharest, 1974, page 138.

⁷ Gheorghe Șoima, *op. cit.*, page 3.

Let us mention the fact that, in most cases, the creators of liturgical choral music have provided enough indications of dynamics and agogics, in the pages of their opus-es, so that the performance be inseparably tied to the text of each prayer, whilst allowing the performer unlimited expressive freedom, or restricted only by the musical logic. Hence, the most important task that a performer is faced with, when tackling a religious score (and not only), should be to comply with the indications given by the composer, since the score is "*the document that inscribes the composer's artistic intentionality*".⁸ This is in no way a restricting of the conductor's personality, quite the contrary, a freedom anchored in the composer's intentions. In other words, one must reject any type of scholastic interpretation that lacks flexibility, whilst avoiding extreme artistic freedom, which can lead to a distortion of the tensional construction intended by the composer, as well as of the message of the liturgical chants. Hence, an extremely sensitive question arises: to what extent may a conductor impose their own version and how much originality can be accepted, on their part? A good answer to this question has been provided by Sydir Vorobkevych in his harmony manual. According to him, "*church music must reflect seriousness, sublimity and dignity; the profane artificialities, the difficult passages and coloraturas or the worldly, sweet, frolicsome, passionate or funny melodies – all these must be avoided in church music*".⁹ It is important that the interpretative vision of any church choir conductor be tightly connected with the divine worship, because the performance of church music, of the religious chants is a genuine way to reach the sublime, to experience more of God's presence, tending toward the transcendent pole. The conductor must endeavour that the music they are performing "permeate the souls of the listeners, stir them, convince and move them",¹⁰ helping the Christians break away from all the worldly troubles. Consequently, both the choral conductor and the members of the ensemble should go beyond the simple act of a musical execution, getting involved emotionally and spiritually in the progression of the liturgical drama.

One might state that any composer writes down absolutely everything that is important to the interpretation and that the conductor may simply follow their instructions as a written recipe, as an exact guide, without adding or eliminating anything. This type of approach is erroneous, rudimentary, lacking logic and consistency. The involvement of the conductor

⁸ Dorel Pașcu-Rădulescu, "*The Way to Interiority*", The Printing House of the National University of Music, Bucharest, 2006, page 32;

⁹ Sydir Vorobkevych, "*Manual of Musical Harmony*", Rudolf Echartd, Chernivtsi (Cernăuți), 1869, page 206;

¹⁰ Augustin Bena, "*Practical Course of Choral Conducting*", "Editura Muzicală" Printing House, Bucharest, 1958, page 34;

in the act of rendering the artistic message is not merely a simple action, which may or may not be achieved. It represents an entirely compulsory necessity, because, as philosopher Nicolai Hartmann stated: “*the composer does not compose all the way; the written music remains relatively general and it is the performing musician that writes it through*”.¹¹ Hence, “the interpreter becomes an associate of the composer, and, thus, the performer(s)’ work is not merely an *artistic rendition*, as they become genuine creators”.¹²

The conductor’s interpretative approach starts from the aesthetic and stylistic premises that underlie the message encrypted in that particular musical creation, filtering these premises in accordance with their sensitiveness and experience. A conductor’s emotional intensity and behaviour render the musical performance unique and unrepeatable.

Although, at first glance, the music of the Divine Liturgy seems to be just another art of sound, in reality it goes far beyond the limits of a “simple” work of art. The Divine Liturgy can in no way be compared to a concert, with performers and listeners. The parishioners are not merely an audience from a concert hall, but, together with the priests performing the ceremony, they participate organically and actually to the development of the religious sermon. Religious music is meant to be sung in the church, therefore, if brought to the concert hall, it may lose its purpose, no longer managing to create the atmosphere of profound religiousness specific to the act of prayer and thus being reduced to a simple artistic act. Hence, it is important to become aware of the fact that, in the Christian cult, the chanting is not merely decorative, but it accompanies and continually deepens the important moments of the divine service.

Even if, ever since the first centuries of orthodoxy, the liturgical chanting has been attributed to a single man (chanting at a lectern), it has always been a group activity, which is demonstrated also in the *Litany of Fervent Supplication* (after the Gospel), when the ministers of the holy altar pray “...for the singers” (plural number). The word *Liturgy* itself derives from the Greek term “*litos*” – *people* and “*ergon*” – *work*, which signifies the active participation of the entire congregation gathered in the church for the liturgical service. The Christian divine cult is a group cult, and not an individual one, which also reflects onto the music. Just as the priest, while performing the Divine Liturgy, prays on behalf of us all, similarly, the choir in its dialogue with the ministers of the holy altar, represents the entire congregation attending the liturgical service. From this standpoint, the performance of liturgical music must reflect the vision of the entire community

¹¹ Nicolai Hartmann, *op. cit.*, page 235.

¹² Nicolai Hartmann, *op. cit.*, page 138.

of Christians and the conductor must render an interpretative version that would represent this community. In this case, a new parallel can be drawn between music and visual arts. Just as the Byzantine icon painters do not seek to express themselves in the icon, so the performer (the conductor) ought not to express their own feelings through the performance, but to continually deepen the teachings of the church. The conductor is not presenting solely their own love towards the Creator, but the love of the entire community of the Holy Church. Only through an intense and emotional feeling of the music can the “*melting into one*”¹³ of the listeners take place, which is the supreme goal of church chanting. Sacred music “*should win over the souls of the Christians gathered in the church, to the glory of God and to their own spiritual education*”¹⁴, because “*music is a calling, by awakening the soul of the listener into communion, into joint vibration, into the most inner life*”.¹⁵ The mission of the performing musician is to awaken profound aesthetic feelings in the souls of the listeners, thus favouring the emergence and enhancement of some psychological states of great intensity. True music represents, first of all, an authentic and expressive emotional experience and the purpose of the artistic message is to create emotions.

It is important that both the conductor and choir members become aware of the fact that, when they are in the choir stall, they become the representatives of all the parishioners attending the Divine Liturgy. If *The Creed* (The Symbol of Faith) or the Lord’s prayer *Our Father* are prayers that are uttered by the entire community within the church, the other chants are attributed to the choir or to the cantors in the lectern. In this regard, priest professor Petre Vintilescu stated: “*after all, in one form or another, in a lower or a higher degree, people have always sung in the church*”,¹⁶ because “*singing together is like a chain that leads to unity; it unites the people into the symphony of a single choir*”.¹⁷

The most important conclusion to be drawn after this endeavour is that liturgical music is meant to transmit the meanings of the sacred texts with precision, without the intention of being in the spotlight. It merely represents the way in which the Christian is provided with a proper climate

¹³ Nicolai Hartmann, *op. cit.*, page 224.

¹⁴ Melchisedec, The archbishop of Roman, *A Report on the Church Chants in Romania*, The State Printing House, Bucharest, 1881, page 1.

¹⁵ Nicolai Hartmann, *op. cit.*, page 224.

¹⁶ Petre Vintilescu, *People’s Chanting inside the Church in the Light of the Missal*, The Printing House of Church Books, Bucharest, 1945, page 8.

¹⁷ St. Basil the Great, *Writings, Homilies on the Psalms (Psalm XXIX)*, The Publishing House of the Byblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Bucharest, 1986, page 184;

for collectedness and humility. In this regard, monk and composer Adam of Fulda (1445-1505) wrote: “*music inclines men to justice ... it brings the libertines back to chastity, (...) it elevates the spirit and exhilarates the mind, thus making men more capable of taking on labour; it restores courage and eventually, obtains the salvation of the soul, for it is only music, amongst the arts, that has been established for this purpose*”.¹⁸

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¹⁸ George Bălan, *Music as a Theme of Philosophical Meditation*, The Scientific Publishing House, Bucharest, 1965, page 31;

