

FROM THE KOINONIKON TO THE PRICEASNĂ: THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE LITURGICAL SOUNDSCAPE AND THE DIGITAL INFLUENCE IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN ORTHODOX MUSIC

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SUMMARY. This article investigates the transformation of the liturgical soundscape associated with the Koinonikon (Communion chant) in contemporary Romanian Orthodox practice. The study combines quantitative and qualitative research methods, integrating survey data collected from theology students, chanters, and choir members with an analysis of the circulation of devotional repertoire in the digital environment, particularly on the platform YouTube. The results indicate a significant shift in musical practice within many Transylvanian parishes. Survey data show that in approximately 86% of the communities represented in the sample, the traditional Byzantine Koinonikon is frequently replaced by the paraliturgical devotional genre known as the priceasnă. This substitution reflects not only a change in repertoire but also broader transformations in musical authority, devotional sensibility, and the mechanisms through which liturgical music circulates. From a musicological perspective, the phenomenon involves a transition from the modal structures of Byzantine psaltic chant toward tonal and strophic musical idioms influenced by vernacular traditions. At the same time, digital media platforms contribute to the standardization and dissemination of a limited corpus of highly visible devotional songs. The article argues that the growing prominence of the priceasnă should be interpreted as a process of liturgical hybridization in which traditional chant, folk religiosity, and contemporary media culture interact. By examining this transformation, the study contributes to current scholarship on Orthodox liturgical music, vernacular devotional practice, and the impact of digital media on religious soundscapes.

Keywords: Koinonikon, Priceasnă, Liturgical Soundscape, YouTube Algorithms, Digital Mediation, Paraliturgical-Affective Model, Byzantine Chant, Religious Influencers, Folk-inspired Devotional Music

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Introduction

Within the structure of the Divine Liturgy, the Communion of the clergy and the faithful, accompanied by the liturgical chant known as the *Koinonikon* (Greek *koinonikon*, “communion”), constitutes one of the most theologically and musically significant moments of the service.² The liturgical order prescribes the chanting of specific psalm verses at this point in the rite, intended to emphasize the sacramental act and to articulate its theological meaning within the framework of the Eucharistic celebration.³

However, the pastoral reality of contemporary Romania in general, and of the Transylvanian Orthodox liturgical space in particular, reveals a noticeable gap between liturgical norm and actual musical practice.⁴ In numerous parish communities, the soundscape traditionally associated with the *Koinonikon* has been progressively replaced by a devotional musical genre known as the *priceasnă*.

In contemporary usage, the term *priceasnă*⁵ generally designates a paraliturgical devotional song associated with the Communion moment and tolerated within many parish settings through pastoral concession. Over time, however, the *priceasna* has evolved from an expression of local devotional practice into a broader cultural phenomenon, increasingly shaped by the dynamics of the music industry and by the circulation mechanisms of social media.

Within the complex landscape of Romanian Orthodox spirituality, the folk *priceasnă* occupies a distinctive position situated at the intersection of liturgical musical norms and vernacular creativity. Although the term itself derives from the Slavonic vocabulary associated with Communion, its historical

² For further details on the *Koinonikon*, see: Dimitri E. Conomos, *The Late Byzantine and Slavonic Communion Cycle: Liturgy and Music*, Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 1985; Thomas H. Schattauer, ‘The *Koinonikon* of the Byzantine Liturgy’, *Orientalia Christiana Periodica*, 49 (1983), p. 91–129; Robert F. Taft, *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom; Volume V: The Precommunion Rites*; Capitolul VI „The Communion Psalmody or “*Koinonikon*”, *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 261, Rome 2000; Nicolae Gheorghită, *Chinonicul dominical în perioada post-bizantină (1453–1821). Liturgică și muzică (The Sunday Koinonikon in the Post-Byzantine Period (1453–1821): Liturgy and Music)*, București, Editura Muzicală, 2007; Adrian Sîrbu, “The “spirit” of the old communion chants.” *Artes. Journal of Musicology* 17, no. 1, 2018, p. 1–23.

³ Alexei Dmitrievsky, *Opisanie liturgicheskikh rukopisei, khраниashchikhsia v bibliotekakh pravoslavnogo Vostoka*, vol. III, Kiev, 1917; *Tipic bisericesc*, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1976.

⁴ *Cântarea liturgică ortodoxă din Sudul Transilvaniei [The Orthodox liturgical chant of Southern Transylvania]*, Editura Universității “Lucian Blaga”, Sibiu, 2007.

⁵ *Dicționar de muzică bisericească românească*, (coord): [*Dictionary of Romanian Church Music*], ed. Nicu Moldoveanu; Nicolae Necula; Vasile Stanciu; Sebastian Barbu-Bucur, Basilica, București, 2013, p. 144. In Church Slavonic it is translated as: Прича́стие – communion, participation, cf: <https://dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/ushakov/978354>

development in Romania, particularly in the Transylvanian regions, has gradually transformed it into an element associated not only with devotional practice but also with regional and confessional identity.

The substitution of the *Koinonikon* with the *priceasnă* cannot be reduced simply to a change in musical style, such as the replacement of Byzantine monody with tonal harmony or melodic elements derived from folk tradition. Rather, it reflects a broader transformation in the way liturgical music functions within parish life. The musical choices made during the Communion moment increasingly respond not only to liturgical prescriptions but also to pastoral expectations, communal participation, and the circulation of devotional repertoire in contemporary media environments.

In this context, the parish community becomes a space that is increasingly permeable to cultural and technological influences. The perceived success of a liturgical moment may therefore be evaluated not only through theological or ritual criteria but also through the emotional resonance of the music performed and the familiarity of the melodies for the congregation.

The present study seeks to analyze this phenomenon through a combined methodological approach that integrates quantitative survey data, qualitative repertoire analysis, and observation of digital media circulation. Its principal objective is to examine the extent to which the *priceasnă* has come to reshape the liturgical soundscape of the *Koinonikon*, as well as the musical, theological, and pastoral implications associated with this transformation.

1. State of research and literature review

The study of Orthodox liturgical chant has generated a substantial body of musicological and liturgical scholarship, particularly with regard to the historical development and structure of the Byzantine psaltic tradition. Foundational research has examined the evolution of the koinonikon repertoire within Byzantine and post-Byzantine liturgical practice, emphasizing its role as a scriptural and mystagogical element within the Eucharistic rite. Scholars such as Dimitri E. Conomos⁶ and Robert F. Taft⁷ have provided detailed analyses of the historical formation of the Communion chant cycle and its integration within the broader structure of Byzantine liturgy.

⁶ Dimitri E. Conomos, *The late Byzantine and Slavonic communion cycle: liturgy and music*, Washington, DC, 1985. „Sacred Music in the Post-Byzantine Era”, In: *The Byzantine Legacy in Eastern Europe*, 1988, p. 83-105

⁷ Robert Taft, F., *A History of the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, Vol. VI: The Communion, Thanksgiving, and Concluding Rites* (Orientalia Christiana Analecta 281), Roma, 2008; „The Frequency of Eucharist in Byzantine Ritual Practice”, in *Beyond East and West. Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, Washington DC, 1984.

Musicological investigations have also addressed the transformation of Byzantine chant in various regional contexts after the fall of Constantinople. Studies focusing on post-Byzantine musical practice highlight the gradual diversification of local traditions and the emergence of new forms of devotional singing alongside canonical psaltic repertoires. In the Romanian context, research by Nicolae Gheorghită⁸ and other scholars has explored the evolution of church music during the post-Byzantine period and the interaction between Byzantine musical structures and local liturgical cultures.

Another important direction of research concerns the relationship between liturgical chant and vernacular religious creativity. Ethnomusicological studies have demonstrated that, in many Orthodox regions, paraliturgical genres often emerge at the intersection between official hymnography and local devotional traditions. In the Romanian cultural space, the genre known as *priceasnă* represents one of the most visible expressions of this interaction between Byzantine liturgical heritage and folk religiosity.⁹

Although the *priceasnă* has been widely acknowledged within Romanian religious culture, it has received comparatively limited scholarly attention in international musicological literature. Existing studies have tended to focus either on the historical development of Byzantine chant or on the ethnographic analysis of Romanian religious folklore, leaving the contemporary interaction between these spheres relatively underexplored.

Recent scholarship in ethnomusicology and digital religion has highlighted the role of digital media platforms in transforming the circulation, reception, and performance of religious music, creating new forms of mediated worship

⁸ Nicolae Gheorghită, *Chinonicul duminical în perioada post-bizantină (1453–1821). Liturgică și muzică*, Editura Sophia / Editura Muzicală, București, 2007; "The Kalophonic Idiom in the second half of the 18th century. The Koinonikon Αἰεῖτε τοῦ Κύριου in the first authentic mode", în: *Acta Musicae Byzantinae* 5/2003, CSBI, p. 45–50; "Observations on the Technique of Transcription (εξήγησις) into the New Method of Analytical Music Notation of the Sunday Koinonikon of the 18th Century", în *PSALTIKE: Neue Studien zur Byzantinischen Musik: Festschrift für Gerda Wolfram*. Herausgegeben Nina–Maria Wanek, Praesens Verlag, Wien, 2011, p. 125–144.

⁹ Gheorghe Ciobanu, „Stratificări în muzica populară românească” [Stratifications in Romanian popular music], în: *Studii de Etnomuzicologie și Bizantinologie*, vol. 2, Editura Muzicală, București, 1979, p. 27. „Izvoare ale muzicii românești” [Sources of Romanian music], in: *Studii de etnomuzicologie și bizantinologie*, vol. I., Editura Muzicală, București, 1976, p. 9; Constanța Cristescu, „Pelerinajul și cântecul de pelerinaj din Transilvania epocii comuniste” [Pilgrimage and pilgrimage song in communist Transylvania], in: *Crâmpeie din cronologia unei deveniri*, vol. 1, Editura Muzicală, București, 2004, p. 55–69; Traian Mârza, „Ritmul vocal acomodată pașilor din mersul ceremonial, un tip distinct al ritmicii populare românești” [The vocal rhythm accommodated to the steps of the ceremonial gait, a distinct type of Romanian folk rhythm], in: *Lucrări de muzicologie*, vol. 10–11, Cluj-Napoca, 1979, p. 245–257.

and musical authority within faith communities.¹⁰ Online media environments have become important channels for the circulation of devotional music, potentially altering the mechanisms through which musical authority and religious legitimacy are constructed.

The present study contributes to this emerging research field by examining the transformation of the liturgical soundscape associated with the koinonikon in contemporary Romanian Orthodoxy. By combining survey data with digital media analysis and musicological observation, the article seeks to bridge the gap between traditional liturgical musicology, ethnomusicology, and the study of religion in the digital age.

2. Research methodology and data architecture

In order to ensure the analytical reliability of the conclusions, the present study adopts a mixed-methods research design. Such an approach makes it possible to move beyond purely impressionistic observations and to map more precisely the contemporary soundscape of ecclesiastical musical practice in the Transylvanian Orthodox context.

The quantitative component of the research consists of a survey administered through a structured questionnaire. The analysis relies on the responses provided by a sample of 200 participants, including theology students, ecclesiastical chanters, and choir members. These respondents are directly involved in the musical life of Orthodox parishes and therefore represent a relevant sample for investigating contemporary repertoire practices. Geographically, the participants represent several regions of Transylvania, including Cluj, Bistrița, Sălaj, and Maramureș, as well as a diversity of ecclesial contexts such as rural parishes, urban parishes, and monastic communities. Although the sample does not claim statistical representativeness for the Romanian Orthodox Church as a whole, it provides a meaningful snapshot of active musical practice within parish environments.

The questionnaire investigated several key variables: the frequency with which the traditional Koinonikon is replaced by the priceasnă; the actors responsible for repertoire selection; the criteria guiding musical choices within the liturgy; the perceived influence of digital media on repertoire circulation.

¹⁰ Rachel, Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*, London: Routledge, (2012); Campbell, Heidi A. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. London: Routledge. 2013; Pauline Hope Cheong (Volume editor) Peter Fischer-Nielsen (Volume editor) Stefan Gelfgren (Volume editor) Charles Ess (Volume editor), *Digital Religion: Social Media and Culture*. New York: Peter Lang. 2012. Tim, Hutchings, *Creating Church Online: Ritual, Community and New Media*. London: Routledge, 2017.

In addition to the survey, the study includes a qualitative analysis of repertoire circulation within the digital environment. This component draws on publicly available data from the platform YouTube, examining metrics such as view counts, subscriber numbers, and the format of devotional music content.¹¹ The analysis included the collection and comparison of data such as number of views, subscriber counts, and content typology for several prominent performers of religious-folk repertoire (e.g., Vlăduța Lupău, Georgiana Lobonț, Paula Hrișcu).¹² These were contrasted with materials representing the psaltic tradition, produced by artists and ensembles such as Maria Coman, Vlad Roșu, Tronos and Byzantion.¹³

It should be emphasized that, although statistical data provide a relatively accurate snapshot of the sample at the moment of investigation, their interpretation requires broader sociological contextualization. For instance, the respondents' frequent indication that "hymns are sung constantly" cannot be understood merely as a numerical datum; rather, it reflects forms of social expectation and pressure exerted upon clergy and chanters regarding repertoire choices. Consequently, the statistical data presented in this study are interpreted not only quantitatively but also through a qualitative analysis of the causal mechanisms that shape these practices.

On the basis of the data obtained, the research pursues several principal objectives: to map the actual frequency with which the traditional Koinonikon is replaced by the priceasnă in contemporary parish practice; to

¹¹ The analysis of repertoire circulation in the digital environment draws on methodological approaches developed in platform studies and online research. In particular, the study follows the perspective proposed by Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, who conceptualize YouTube as a participatory cultural environment in which indicators such as view counts, subscriber numbers, and user interactions can function as measurable signs of the visibility and circulation of video content. At the same time, the use of publicly available online data follows the methodological framework for digital research outlined by Helene Snee, who considers such data suitable for the qualitative analysis of contemporary cultural practices. The relevance of platform metrics for social research has also been discussed in studies of social media analytics, which highlight both the potential and the interpretative limitations of these indicators when assessing audience engagement. See Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Helene Snee, "Digital Methods as Mainstream Methodology: Methods of Online Research," in *A Handbook of Qualitative Methods in Psychology* (London: Sage, 2013); Mike Thelwall, "Social Media Analytics for YouTube Comments: Potential and Limitations," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 21, no. 3, 2018, p. 303–316.

¹² @VladutaLupau (1.03M subscribers); @GeorgianaLobont (658K subscribers); @PaulaHriscu (173K subscribers). The aggregated data were recorded on 11 March 2026; subscriber numbers are subject to change depending on viewing dynamics and audience engagement on the platform.

¹³ Vlad Roșu (181K subscribers); Maria Coman (94,4K subscribers). Grupul Psaltic Tronos și Mihail Bucă (69,4K subscribers). „Byzantion Choir” (10,3K subscribers).

identify the actors involved in repertoire decision-making and the corresponding mechanisms of authority within the clergy–choir–congregation relationship; to analyze the “platform logic” of digital media, algorithms, view counts, compilation formats, and the emergence of a star system, as a factor contributing to the standardization of repertoire; and to describe the musicological transformations involved in this process (modality versus tonality, changes in ethos, and vocal timbre) and their broader implications for contemporary religious music.

3. Liturgical practice and the hegemony of the priceasna in Transylvanian musical culture

The analysis of the data collected through the questionnaire reveals a musical reality that complicates the assumption of complete uniformity in the repertoire of Romanian Orthodox church music. Although efforts to standardize the national repertoire have existed since the mid-twentieth century, local practices continue to display considerable diversity.¹⁴ In numerous parishes belonging to the Metropolis of Cluj, Maramureș, and Sălaj, as well as in certain monastic communities, the traditional Koinonikon has gradually become less frequent, being replaced in many contexts by the repertoire of priceasna.

Within the Transylvanian ecclesiastical musical repertoire, the term priceasnă has acquired a broad generic meaning. It often refers to a wide range of devotional songs belonging to the sphere of religious folklore.¹⁵ These compositions differ from canonical hymnography in that their texts are frequently products of popular artistic creativity, sometimes anonymous, and shaped by the sensibility of Romanian folk religiosity.

Over time, folk pricesne have gradually entered the liturgical framework of the Divine Liturgy. They may be sung either during the moment traditionally associated with the Koinonikon or independently of it, particularly in parish contexts where the active participation of the congregation in singing is encouraged.

A defining musical characteristic of this repertoire, especially in Transylvania, is the influence of the doina, a genre associated with expressive melodic freedom and emotional intensity. The priest and musicologist

¹⁴ The purpose of this standardization was the creation of a unified and simplified repertoire, purged of what were perceived as “Oriental excesses” (such as overly extended melismas), and accessible to chanters both in rural and urban churches. At the same time, this process sought to eliminate the differences between local styles—for example, the Moldavian style associated with Suceveanu and the Transylvanian style represented by Cunțanu.

¹⁵ Daniel Mocanu: “Christian ceremonial folk song. case study: pilgrimage songs from nicula monastery” *Studia Ubb Musica*, LXIX, Special Issue 3, 2024, p. 33-55.

Gheorghe Șoima argued that church choral music in Transylvania was strongly shaped by melodic elements derived from the doina, as well as from religious carols and star songs. In his interpretation, this interaction should not be viewed negatively but rather as a creative encounter between liturgical chant and vernacular musical culture.¹⁶

Musically, this influence is manifested through the frequent use of parlando-rubato rhythmic patterns, which allow considerable expressive freedom in the delivery of the text, as well as through melismatic ornamentation reminiscent of the lamenting character typical of the doina.¹⁷

Unlike psaltic chant, which maintains a restrained and solemn ethos structured by modal principles, the priceasnă often incorporates melodic gestures characteristic of vernacular song traditions. This stylistic hybridity contributes to the emotional accessibility of the repertoire for parish communities.

Another important feature of the priceasnă tradition is its close relationship with religious carols and star songs. In many rural communities, melodies originally associated with Christmas carols were adapted to devotional texts dealing with moral or hagiographic themes and subsequently introduced into the liturgical environment, particularly during fasting periods.¹⁸

The melodic and rhythmic affinities between the doina, carols, vernacular songs, and priceasne illustrate how Romanian religious culture has integrated hymnographic material of popular origin into both liturgical practice and everyday devotional life.

Within this context, the priceasnă has sometimes been described metaphorically as a form of “religious song”. Beyond its musical structure, the genre functions as a form of vernacular catechesis in which theological themes, such as the Passion of Christ, repentance, or Marian intercession, are expressed through emotionally accessible language and imagery.

4. Frequency of koinonikon substitution: from exception to norm

The central question of this study, “How often are priceasna sung instead of the traditional Koinonikon?”, produced results that point toward the normalization of this practice in many parish contexts.

¹⁶ Gheorghe Șoima, “Folclorul muzical religios” (Religious Musical Folklore), in: *Scrieri de teologie și muzicologie (Writings on Theology and Musicology)*, Ediție îngrijită de Vasile Grăjdian și Cornelia Grăjdian, Editura Universității „Lucian Blaga”, Sibiu, 2010, p. 185.

¹⁷ Constanța Cristescu, „Pelerinajul și cântecul de pelerinaj din Transilvania epocii comuniste” [Pilgrimage and pilgrimage song in communist Transylvania], p. 57.

¹⁸ Gheorghe Ciobanu, “Colindele și muzică religioasă” [Christmas Carols and Religious Music], in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 1-3, 1947, p. 30-49.

According to the survey data, approximately 86% of respondents report that devotional hymns are frequently or regularly sung during the liturgical moment traditionally reserved for the Koinonikon. This finding suggests that the substitution of the canonical Communion chant with the priceasnă is no longer perceived merely as an occasional pastoral adaptation.

For many of the respondents, the sonic identity of the Sunday liturgy is associated not primarily with the psalmic chant of the Koinonikon, but rather with the strophic and tonal melodic language of the priceasna. Although historically this genre was strongly associated with Transylvania, the available data suggest that contemporary media circulation contributes to its diffusion beyond regional boundaries.

The questionnaire responses also reveal an important shift in repertoire authority. Within the hierarchical structure of Orthodox liturgy, the priest traditionally occupies the central liturgical role. However, in practical musical matters, repertoire decisions are frequently shaped by lay participants involved in parish singing.

According to the survey results, approximately 88% of repertoire decisions are made primarily by chanters or choir members. This dynamic helps explain the permeability of parish musical practice to external influences, including digital media.

Young chanters or lay choir leaders, often lacking extensive formal training in Byzantine chant, are particularly exposed to musical models circulating on platforms such as YouTube, as well as to the expectations of the congregation, which frequently prefers familiar melodies.

When respondents were asked why certain pieces are selected, a principal factor emerged: the musical level of the choir. Byzantine psaltic compositions, for example those attributed to Petru Lampadarie, Hurmuz Hartofilax, or Iacov Protopsaltul, often require familiarity with psaltic notation and advanced vocal technique. In contrast, priceasne usually employ simpler melodic structures that can be performed without specialized training.

Many respondents indicated that repertoire is chosen according to the liturgical season or thematic relevance, although this criterion is sometimes applied in a relatively flexible manner.

Choir members frequently select pieces that they expect will resonate emotionally with the faithful, creating a feedback loop in which familiar hymns are repeatedly performed because they generate positive responses from listeners.

5. The role of digital media in the transformation of liturgical chant: the case of YouTube

An important dimension of the present study concerns the influence of the digital environment on contemporary devotional musical practice. The analysis of audiovisual materials circulating online indicates that the platform YouTube has become a significant reference point for the dissemination and reception of Romanian religious songs. Through mechanisms of algorithmic recommendation, visibility metrics, and user engagement, the platform contributes to the formation of a new ecosystem of religious musical circulation.¹⁹

Within this environment, the *priceasna* has undergone a notable transformation. Originally associated with local devotional contexts, the genre has increasingly entered the circuits of the contemporary music industry and digital media culture.

Several performers known primarily for their activity in Romanian folk music, including Vlăduța Lupău, Paula Hrișcu, Cristian Pomohaci, and Georgiana Lobonț, have contributed significantly to the popularization of this repertoire, adapting devotional songs to performance styles shaped by the aesthetics of contemporary folk and popular music.

As a result, the *priceasna* has gradually moved beyond the strictly ecclesiastical environment and has become widely present on digital platforms and concert stages. On YouTube, compilations of devotional songs frequently accumulate millions of views, particularly during liturgical seasons such as Great Lent or the Dormition Fast. This phenomenon suggests that contemporary audiences continue to display a substantial interest in religious musical content.

At the same time, the popularity of such productions raises questions regarding the changing aesthetic framework within which devotional music circulates. In many digital recordings, traditional hymns are arranged using modern instrumentation, such as saxophone, keyboard, or studio orchestration,

¹⁹ On platforms such as YouTube, the visibility and circulation of musical content are shaped by a combination of algorithmic recommendation systems and publicly visible engagement metrics. Videos that accumulate higher numbers of views, subscribers, likes, and comments tend to be promoted more frequently by the platform's recommendation algorithms, which increases their visibility and probability of further circulation among users. In the case of Romanian devotional repertoire, such as the genre commonly known as *pricesne*, these mechanisms contribute to the amplification of particular performances or performers, allowing certain recordings to reach audiences far beyond their original liturgical or local contexts. As a result, YouTube functions not merely as a repository of audiovisual material but as a mediating environment that actively shapes the dissemination, reception, and standardization of devotional musical repertoires through processes of algorithmic visibility and participatory engagement.

and are performed in ways that emphasize the individuality and expressive charisma of the performer. In such contexts, the interpretative focus may shift from the theological message of the text toward the performative presence of the singer.

This development has generated critical discussion within certain ecclesiastical circles, where it is sometimes interpreted as a possible transformation of devotional music into a form of religious spectacle. In response to these dynamics, media institutions affiliated with the Romanian Orthodox Church, such as Trinitas TV, have attempted to promote alternative forms of religious broadcasting that emphasize the spiritual and liturgical meaning of sacred chant. Through recordings of liturgical services and educational programs, such initiatives present singing as an integral dimension of Orthodox worship and as a means through which believers approach God through beauty.

A comparison between the audience indicators associated with popular devotional music and those of traditional liturgical chant reveals a considerable difference in reception. While recordings of psaltic chant remain closely linked to the ritual context of liturgical performance and therefore attract a relatively specialized audience, devotional songs circulating online frequently reach much broader publics.

For example, recordings by the artist Maria Coman, including “Psalm 50” (over eight million views) and “Hymn of Love” (over six million views)²⁰, demonstrate the capacity of digital media to amplify the visibility of religious repertoire. Such examples illustrate how contemporary media environments facilitate the circulation of devotional music far beyond the boundaries of liturgical space.

Similarly, Paula Hrișcu’s song *Ce folos?* (“What Is the Use?”)²¹, with more than eight million views, illustrates the resonance of devotional themes when presented through contemporary audiovisual aesthetics. The video, filmed in the landscapes of rural Maramureș, integrates symbolic elements such as the *toacă*, traditional costumes, and forest imagery, thereby transforming the hymn into a visually compelling narrative in which cinematic imagery reinforces the affective dimension of the song.

Another example is the song *La tine vin, Măicuță* (“I Come to You, Mother”)²², performed by Lavinia Maria Chifor, which has accumulated more than four million views. Its interpretative style reflects the emotional expressivity characteristic of Transylvanian devotional singing and demonstrates the enduring importance of Marian piety in Romanian religious culture.

²⁰ Hymn of Love: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wjeburhcwww](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wjeburhcwww;);

Psalm 50 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzzFyToyHuw>.

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mQyNaexu69k>.

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VmYuggiHfjg>.

By contrast, recordings of traditional psaltic chant, such as those performed by the Tronos Group or Athonite chanters, typically attract audiences in the range of tens or hundreds of thousands of views. This disparity in visibility can generate a form of symbolic legitimization based on digital popularity. For many online users, numerical indicators associated with a video function as markers of authority, potentially influencing perceptions regarding which musical repertoire appears most relevant or meaningful.

The analysis also reveals a growing trend toward the consumption of extended devotional compilations, often presented under titles such as “Pricesne for Easter”.²³ These recordings frequently last between fifty and ninety minutes and are commonly used as background listening. In this context, devotional singing may acquire the character of ambient religious sound, detached from the participatory framework that traditionally characterizes liturgical chant.

These digital media productions contribute to the formation of new aesthetic expectations. Listeners accustomed to studio-produced vocal timbre, artificial reverberation, and instrumental accompaniment may begin to perceive the austere, a cappella sound of traditional psaltic chant as less immediately accessible. As a consequence, stylistic adaptation can also appear within parish choirs. Choir members may imitate interpretative features encountered in digital recordings, including vibrato, glissando, or expressive ornamentation derived from folk performance traditions. In this way, digital media not only disseminate repertoire but also influence interpretative practices within local ecclesiastical contexts.

The study further identifies the emergence of a category of mediators operating between ecclesiastical and cultural spheres. Certain clergy-performers, such as Vlad Roșu and Marius Ciprian Pop, combine pastoral authority with artistic visibility. Their dual identity as priests and performers may contribute to the legitimization of devotional repertoire influenced by folk musical aesthetics.

Taken together, these observations suggest that digital media function not merely as repositories of musical recordings but as influential agents in shaping contemporary liturgical soundscapes. The circulation of devotional music through digital platforms contributes to the emergence of hybrid forms situated between traditional liturgical chant and the communicative logic of modern audiovisual culture.

²³ Pricesne for Easter, Pricesne for Great Lent;
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VpxRU4TMvs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VpxRU4TMvs;);
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ussj7Jq15OU>.

6. Textual and musicological analysis of the priceasna repertoire

Beyond the statistical data presented above, a qualitative examination of the repertoire itself is necessary in order to understand the theological and musicological implications of the priceasnă phenomenon. Content analysis of the most frequently performed songs suggests a shift from doctrinally structured hymnography toward repertoire characterized by emotional and devotional expression.

The survey data, corroborated by digital circulation patterns, indicate that the contemporary repertoire frequently includes songs such as *Fecioară Maică* (“Virgin Mother”), *La tine vin, Măicuță* (“I Come to You, Mother”), and *O, Măicuță Sfântă* (“O Holy Mother”). These compositions have become informal devotional standards in many parish communities. Their popularity is largely explained by their simple melodic structure and their direct emotional address to the maternal figure of the Virgin Mary. The textual content of widely circulated Romanian devotional songs such as *Fecioară Maică* (“Virgin Mother”), *La tine vin, Măicuță* (“I Come to You, Mother”), and *O, Măicuță Sfântă* (“O Holy Mother”) is characterized by a highly affective Marian vocabulary centered on themes of intercession, maternal protection, and personal supplication. The lyrics typically employ direct address to the Virgin Mary and emphasize an intimate devotional relationship expressed through diminutive forms (e.g., *Măicuță*, “little Mother”), a feature characteristic of Romanian popular piety. Structurally, these songs are strophic and repetitive, facilitating congregational singing and memorization. From a theological perspective, the texts foreground the role of the Mother of God as compassionate mediator and spiritual refuge, while musically they belong to the paraliturgical repertoire commonly performed during the Communion moment in many Romanian parishes. Their strong emotional language and accessible poetic structure contribute significantly to their popularity and circulation in contemporary devotional contexts, including digital platforms such as YouTube.

The predominance of Marian devotional songs during the Communion moment therefore introduces a certain liturgical tension. While the Mother of God occupies an essential place in Orthodox theology as an intercessor, the replacement of Christocentric Eucharistic hymnography with Marian devotional repertoire reflects a broader shift in devotional sensibility. In many cases, the emotional and protective symbolism associated with the maternal figure of Mary resonates strongly with the affective expectations of contemporary believers.

In contrast, the traditional Koinonikon chants, such as *The Body of Christ* or *Praise the Lord from the heavens*, possess a clearly defined mystagogical function within the liturgy. Their textual content proclaims the sacramental presence of Christ and invites the faithful to participate in the Eucharistic mystery.

A similar transformation can be observed in hymns that portray Christ primarily in intimate or personal terms, for example, songs that describe Him as a compassionate friend who consoles human suffering. Such imagery reflects influences associated with pietistic devotional currents that emphasize the personal dimension of religious experience.

From a musicological perspective, the priceasna repertoire also displays important structural differences from Byzantine psaltic chant. Traditional psaltic music is organized according to the modal system of the eight *echoi*, which represent complex melodic frameworks governed by characteristic formulas and microtonal inflections.

By contrast, the musical language of the priceasna often adopts the tonal framework typical of Western music, based on the major–minor system. Instead of the modal thinking characteristic of Byzantine chant, melodies are frequently organized within a tonal reference system that is familiar to listeners shaped by Western musical culture.

This transition from modality to tonality also implies a reorganization of melodic hierarchy. In psaltic chant, cadences typically represent a return to the modal base of the voice. In tonal music, however, melodic closure is structured through the dominant–tonic relationship. Such cadential patterns produce a sense of resolution that is immediately recognizable for modern listeners but differs fundamentally from the aesthetic logic of Byzantine chant.

Another significant difference concerns intonation. The tonal system relies on equal-tempered semitones, whereas Byzantine chant often employs microtonal intervals characteristic of specific modes. The adoption of equal temperament facilitates harmonic accompaniment and makes the repertoire easier to perform with instruments such as keyboard or orchestral arrangements.

A similar divergence appears in the rhythmic dimension. Psaltic chant follows the prosody of the liturgical text and therefore lacks strict metric regularity. By contrast, the priceasna typically adopts regular metrical structures (for example 2/4, 3/4, or 4/4), which facilitate memorization and collective participation.²⁴

From a musicological perspective, this transformation may be interpreted as a form of simplification that increases accessibility. Complex melismatic passages characteristic of psaltic chant are often replaced by syllabic melodic writing, allowing broader participation by congregations that may not possess formal musical training.

²⁴ Victor Giuleanu, *Melodica bizantină, studiu theoretic și morfologic al stilului modern (neobizantin)*, *Byzantine Melodics: A Theoretical and Morphological Study of the Modern (Neo-Byzantine) Style*. Editura Muzicală, București, 1981.ș

7. Transformations in the classical repertoire of church hymnography

The growing prominence of the priceasna repertoire has several observable consequences for the musical life of Orthodox parishes. Some of these developments may be interpreted positively from a pastoral perspective, while others raise questions regarding the preservation of liturgical musical tradition.

One important consequence is the emergence of a secondary devotional repertoire that competes in familiarity with the established body of Byzantine hymnography. In many communities, believers recognize and request particular devotional songs more readily than canonical Koinonikon. As a result, the musical memory of the community gradually shifts toward songs characterized by simple melodic patterns and memorable refrains.

This development also affects the functional balance between liturgical chant and contextual devotional singing. In practice, the Communion moment, traditionally associated with the Koinonikon, may be filled with devotional songs, particularly during fasting periods or during services attended by large congregations.

Another consequence concerns the increasing standardization of repertoire across different regions. Devotional songs circulating widely through digital media are rapidly adopted in geographically distant parishes. Local variants and regional interpretations may therefore be replaced by a relatively uniform repertoire disseminated through digital platforms.

This phenomenon can be described as a form of platform-driven repertoire circulation, in which a small group of widely known songs becomes dominant because they are easily accessible online and already familiar to audiences.

The stylistic influence of priceasna is also perceptible in the interpretative practices of parish choirs. These songs frequently employ tonal frameworks and expressive phrasing associated with folk or popular music performance. When such stylistic features are transferred to the liturgical environment, they may gradually reshape the ethos of church singing, shifting emphasis from liturgical sobriety toward expressive performance.

At the same time, the criteria of musical authority have begun to change. Traditionally, repertoire authority was derived from liturgical books, the Typikon, and formal musical education. In contemporary contexts, however, recordings encountered online frequently function as practical interpretative models for younger chanters.

From a pastoral perspective, the priceasnă phenomenon therefore presents a complex duality. On the one hand, devotional songs may facilitate

participation and function as accessible forms of religious catechesis. On the other hand, excessive reliance on such repertoire may risk diminishing the theological depth and liturgical specificity of traditional Byzantine hymnography.

Conclusions and Perspectives

The findings of this study confirm that the liturgical moment traditionally associated with the *koinonikon* has undergone significant transformation in contemporary Romanian Orthodox parish practice. The data collected through the survey, corroborated by observations of digital media circulation, indicate that the *priceasna* has become a prominent element within the musical soundscape of the Divine Liturgy in many communities.

One of the most important results of the research concerns the frequency with which devotional songs replace the traditional Communion chant. According to the survey responses, approximately 86% of the participants report that *priceasna* are frequently or regularly performed during the moment traditionally reserved for the *koinonikon*. This finding suggests that the phenomenon should no longer be interpreted as a marginal pastoral concession but rather as a widespread practice within certain ecclesial contexts.

At the same time, the study reveals the emergence of new mechanisms of musical authority. While liturgical tradition historically located authority in ecclesiastical texts, the Typikon, and formal musical training, contemporary repertoire circulation is increasingly influenced by digital media. Platforms such as YouTube play a significant role in shaping the visibility and diffusion of devotional songs, contributing to the formation of a shared repertoire that transcends regional boundaries.

From a musicological perspective, the phenomenon also reflects a broader stylistic transformation. The modal structures and microtonal nuances characteristic of Byzantine psaltic chant are often replaced by tonal musical frameworks derived from Western musical practice and vernacular traditions. This shift facilitates accessibility and congregational participation but simultaneously alters the aesthetic and theological ethos traditionally associated with liturgical chant.

The textual dimension of the repertoire likewise reveals a change in devotional sensibility. While the traditional *koinonikon* emphasizes the Christocentric and sacramental dimension of the Eucharist, many *pricesne* foreground Marian devotion or adopt an intimate and affective language of personal religiosity. This transformation may reflect broader shifts in contemporary religious experience, in which emotional engagement plays an increasingly important role.

However, the results of this study should not be interpreted exclusively in terms of opposition between tradition and innovation. The popularity of the *priceasna* also demonstrates the capacity of vernacular devotional culture to sustain religious participation in changing social contexts. For many believers, these songs function as accessible forms of catechesis and as vehicles of communal identity.

Consequently, the phenomenon may be understood as a process of liturgical hybridization, in which elements of Byzantine chant, folk religiosity, and contemporary media culture intersect. Rather than representing a simple replacement of one repertoire with another, the emergence of the *priceasna* within the liturgical soundscape reflects a dynamic negotiation between inherited musical tradition and evolving pastoral realities.

Future research could further investigate this interaction by expanding the geographical scope of the survey, by conducting ethnographic fieldwork within parish communities, and by analyzing the role of digital media in shaping religious musical aesthetics across other Orthodox contexts.

In this sense, the transformation of the *koinonikon* soundscape offers an important case study for understanding how liturgical traditions adapt within contemporary cultural environments while continuing to negotiate the relationship between canonical heritage and lived religious practice.

Translated from Romanian by Angelica Marcu

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