

THE TEXTS OF PSALMS OF DAVID IN CLASSICAL MUSICAL CREATIONS

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SUMMARY. The classical period composers have lived the religious feeling just like their predecessors and successors, with all social and cultural changes that took place over the time. The religious feeling expressed through the texts of Psalms is a leitmotif in the universal musical history. In this paper I will talk about the musical pieces that have religious texts; the spiritual universe suggested by the composers lead to the human-religious face of the art – statement for the need of a hermeneutic approach in the music analysis. The cosmos given by the creators through art can be accessed only through a contextual understanding of the masterpieces, the Psalms of David being a guideline in the historic-comparative journey proposed by this paper.

Keywords: classical, psalms, religious, hermeneutics.

Introduction

The classical period composers have lived the religious feeling just like their predecessors and successors, with all social and cultural changes that took place over time. The religious feeling expressed through the texts of Psalms is a leitmotif of universal musical history.

The desire for symmetry in classical music, the necessity to give up the multitude of ornaments typical to previous periods, the occurrence of new musical genres and forms, the blossoming of the concept of public concert but also the idea of musical education among amateurs, all these appeared due to social and political changes in Europe but also to the human necessities that ensued. As Henri Peyre said, the classical attitude of creators was about accepting conventions meant to help and enchant the public². The classical composer maintained the complicity with his

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² Daniel Heartz, Bruce Alan Brown, in: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

audience in order to please them. In spite of everything we said, we are not surprised by the occurrence of the texts of psalms in classical creations, human spirituality is a manifestation of missing the Sky.

Following this, we shall direct our attention towards the classical composers that dressed Old Testament musical texts in a personal style.

Discussion

1. Cristoph Willibald Gluck

Recognized for his merits in regards to the opera style, C. W. Gluck (1714-1787)³ performed a synthesis of existing characteristics of the opera of the time in order to outline music accessible to all the people. This propensity of the composer toward universality argues the necessity of religious sound being expressed through the text of the psalms.

The motet *De profundis*, created in the last year of the composer's life, is an after work⁴ in which the echoes of the choirs in the opera are highlighted through features, mainly syllabic writing and a typically classical lyricism. Nevertheless, the religious structure of the psalm for the choir and orchestra is supported by the sober atmosphere outlined by Gluck. The musical texture can be set into the homophonous classical pattern, with short polyphonic occurrences such as personal prayer knitted with the collective prayer. The introvert profile of the opposite naturally overlaps the text of Psalm 129, the prayer environment proves to be a composition of maturity.

Mainly interested in colouring, on a timbre level as well as a harmonical one, Gluck proves a musical deepness through his capacity to adapt his language to the musical style to which the psalm in question pertains. Orchestration composed of low strings, oboe, bassoon, horn and three trombones, induces a solemn atmosphere, knitted with short but unitary phrases of choral voices, in mainly homophonous writing. Outlining different feelings in accordance with the lyrics of the Psalm 129 suggests a picture in rich shades. I am talking about shades and not colours, because the whole work is set under an inseparable status - solemnity with its connotations, depending on the religious texts.

³ Bruce Alan Brown <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>

⁴ Patricia Howard, 2003.

2. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

“...Mozart’s house was sincerely Catholic. Religion was an honourable convention and a commitment of decent behaviour.”⁵ Echoes of the Catholic education were felt through Mozart’s creation. Thus, the works on the texts of Psalms could not miss from the artistic creation of the genius. We will follow further down and we will mention two works composed for the church; they are two vespers scores, the structure and the chosen texts abide by the rubrics of the church. Music is also subjected to the liturgical spirit but the expressions typical to Mozart do not miss from these church scores. “In these works, Mozart alluded to the former contrapuntal church style and pointed the way to the contrastive symphonic manner of Beethoven.”⁶ The merging between subjectivism and the laws of religious music writing is a special feature of the two vespers scores.

Vesperae de Dominica, K.321, is a score composed for mixed choir, solo and orchestra group. The music for Sunday vespers was created upon the request of Archbishop Colloredo. The musical opera in discussion is structured in six parts, each with an independent text.

The psalms used as a textual basis are *Dixit* (ps. 109), *Confitebor* (ps. 110), *Beatus vir* (ps. 111), *Laudate pueri* (ps. 112), *Laudate Dominum* (ps. 116), with a last conclusive part – *Magnificat*. The occurrence of a large number of Psalms in the vespers service supports the argument that texts attributed to king David are some of the most used in the human religious life. Upon a short analysis of the score of the vespers, we notice a lack of polytextuality, which suggests a moving away from the ancient style of religious music writing and an enhanced importance offered to the direct approach to the religious text.

For the psalm *Dixit*, Mozart shows a sound performance in C major tonality, the writing combines lyrical solo occurrences with choral answers, on an orchestral basis typical for Mozart, the atmosphere being a bright and festive one.

⁵ Alfred Einstein, p.78.

⁶ Daniel Floyd Bird, p. 57.

Dixit

Allegro vivace

Clarini in Do | C

Timpani in Do, Sol | C, G

Trombone alto

Trombone tenore

Trombone basso

Violino I

Violino II

Soprano
Tutti
Di - - xit Do - mi - nus Do - mi - no me - - - - o:

Alto
Tutti
Di - - xit Do - mi - nus Do - mi - no me - - - - o: Se - de a

Tenore
Tutti
Di - - xit Do - mi - nus Do - mi - no me - - - - o:

Basso
Tutti
Di - - xit Do - mi - nus Do - mi - no me - - - - o: Se - de a

Violoncello, Fagotto, Basso ed Organo
Tutti

W.A. Mozart: *Vesperae de Dominica*, K.321, *Dixit*, the first measures

In the case of Psalm *Confitebor*, the option of the composer in terms of sound system - tonality E minor – and triple meter - leads to a certain understanding of the religious text, an introvert adaptation of the praise psalm.

THE TEXTS OF PSALMS OF DAVID IN CLASSICAL MUSICAL CREATIONS

This idea is supported by the melodically beginning as a solo soprano voice through a lyrical melody under the form of confession.

E.g. 2

Allegro

Trombone alto

Trombone tenore

Trombone basso

Violino I

Violino II

Soprano

Alto

Tenore

Basso

Fagotti et Violoncelli, Org. tasto

Violoncello, Fagotto, Basso ed Organo

Solo

Con-fi - te - bor ti - bi Do-mi-ne in - to - to cor-de me - o: in con-

p

fp

tr

p n.

Introductory fragment from *Confitebor* (*Vesperae de Dominica*) by Mozart

Beatus vir conveys in musical language the blessings that come upon those who obey the law of God.

The sound writing generates an atmosphere full of hope, the melismatic texture of the solo voices but also of the choral voices looks like a symbol of elation that comes unto the faithful upon the thought of redemption through one's behaviour and God's mercy.

Laudate pueri occurs like a single counterpoint movement, in contrast with the other parts of the *Vesperae de Dominica* work. The writing style of the component parts can be characterised by a dualism based on a type of syllabic musical declamation and an option for contrapuntal occurrences. This stylistic dualism is abandoned in the case of Psalm 112, and the polyphony is being felt from the first measures of the score. The Psalm *Laudate pueri* is built under the form of a fugue on four voices.



Manuscript page, first measures from *Laudate pueri - Vesperae de Dominica*⁷

The last psalm musically treated by Mozart is *Laudate Dominum*, the resulting sound pages being a soprano aria. The option for this type of writing is grounded in the desire for contrast as opposed to the previous psalms, Mozart's light textures, with fragments of vocal virtuosity along the aria, prepare the majestic conclusive pages from the *Magnificat*.

We mention a second sound opera, ***Vesperae solennes de confessore***. Abiding by the pattern of the abovementioned one, this vespers score is based on the same psalm text, with the *Magnificat* ending. Not only the text is common for the two religious Mozart's creations, but also the method of treating the sound material. A comparative analysis of the pages of musical art highlights a specifically religious style, in which

⁷ http://petrucci.mus.auth.gr/imglnks/usimg/5/5f/IMSLP293151-PMLP160847-Mozart_-_Vesperae_de_Dominica,_K321_-autograph-.pdf

traditional composition methods are artistically knitted with the aspirations of the new creation. The antico style is reflected in the contrapuntal writing, but it is frequently replaced by a homophonous way of thinking, predictable rhythmic and classical cadences, with the purpose of a conclusion of symmetrical musical phrases. We encounter composition methods such as stretto and canon, followed by isorhythmic and homophonous declamations. In this work, we notice also the propensity toward contrasts among the component parts of vespers, which is performed through the use of different tonalities in the case of psalms, different metrics, but also various ways of sound expression – the occurrence of a fugue on four voices, followed by a psalm of the soprano type.

The two arias from the works *Vesperae de Dominica* and *Vesperae solennes de confessore* remind of the writing style of Mozart's works, but they are different through having a more concise structure. Solo pages for soprano voice are created under the form of a tripartite lied, with an ending on the word: Amen, with a coda role.

E.g. 4



Melismatic writing on the solo soprano voice, on the word: Amen (Coda from *Laudate Dominum – Vesperae solennes de confessore*)

Performing a stylistic and musical language synthesis, Mozart outlines, through his religious works for church, original sound pages, in which tradition merges with the new, in which Mozart's style in full development overlaps the expectations of church music. The psalms of David are a pretext for intimate expressions, but also an occasion for communion at the evening services.

“Thus out of the glorious cantilena of Italian music, the passionate expressiveness of 'storm and stress,' and the solid craftsmanship of Salzburg church music, Mozart developed for his sacred compositions a language that was noble and yet light, technically competent and yet free of

*ponderousness. Contrapuntal features were henceforth integrated with ease into homophonic parts; in this choral style of rare perfection, the fugatos and imitations soon became natural components of the music, no longer creating the impression of learned display*⁸.

Conclusions

My writing today talks about the musical pieces with religious texts; the spiritual universe suggested by composers lead to the human-religious face of art – statement for the need of a hermeneutic approach in the music analysis. The cosmos given by creators through art can be accessed only through a contextual understanding of the masterpieces, the Psalms of David being a guideline in the historic-comparative journey proposed by this paper.

Translate revised by: Claudia Ciubancan.

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⁸ Karl Geiringer, p. 365.