

## ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN THE VOCAL MUSIC OF ROMANIAN COMPOSERS (SOLOISTS REPERTOIRE FOR SOPRANO, CHORAL AND SYMPHONIC VOCAL REPERTOIRE – THE SECOND HALF OF THE 20<sup>th</sup> CENTURY AND THE BEGINNING OF THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY)

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**SUMMARY.** The Romanian repertoire is rich if we refer to the one dedicated to the Christian elements to praising the Lord, the Virgin Mary, or to the creations of the type Ave Maria, Our Father, Requiem, cantata, etc. Romanian composers created works about the glory of God and of the Mother of God, displaying a special approach to the texts of these prayers. In the Romanian vocal art at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> c., if we concentrate on the soloist repertoire for soprano, the choral and vocal symphonic repertoire, we discover the following terms of reference which can be associated with the research of elements of Christian tradition and spirituality in the Romanian musical culture from George Enescu until the present day.

**Keywords:** voice, Christianity, soprano, modernity

### 1. Introduction

At the symposium dedicated to the Romanian lied, organized in Brașov – *About the lied in contemporary times* – the composer Dan Dediu stated on this topic: “to write a lied for piano means to write for voice. In order to write for voice one needs to have solved certain basic composition problems. First of all, the problem of the melody. Then, the one of the harmony and, finally, an important problem, that of the *details* in piano composition. In order to solve these problems one must go through them, not think about them from the other’s perspective, by proxy, as to adopt methods

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in the lied means to feel with someone else's soul. Moreover, the lied is perhaps the most vulnerable genre and this is why it is the most insufferable of all musical genres, because in it you cannot hide nor cheat. It is like facing God, bare, with all your qualities and defects.

This is the reason why it takes courage to write and play a lied: the courage to show yourself as you are. The piano lied involves clarity, accuracy and poise of expression. It is a form of higher life, of profound and mature art; a form of life in which the distinction of feelings, the subtlety and complexity of all these strings acquire a symbolic power. Finally, the lied is an essence. It lives more through what it does not say than through what it says. Allusion is its environment, and the precision and determination of the musical expression define its style.

What place can the lied hold in our times? Infested by all types of songs, from top hits to fleshless cheap music, the lied remains isolated, uneasy with its own existence. Common sense, good taste and civilization – these are the qualities of the lied, its pride. Fallen into oblivion, it will awaken when man, tired by instincts on public unfiltered display, will start looking for dignity”<sup>3</sup>.

This research is novel and original, because it has never been conducted on such a modern Romanian repertoire, as part of a musicological study. “Church music is the best way to set the Christian dogma and tradition”<sup>4</sup>, thus, from the perspective of promoting this topic, music represents more than an aesthetic act: it is an act of faith. Beethoven stated that music is a greater revelation than wisdom and philosophy, and Beaumarchais said that music begins when the word ends, that which cannot be spoken can be expressed through music.

The Holy Scripture, the Holy Fathers and great thinkers of the world abundantly demonstrate that music elevates man's soul towards God. This is why music needs to be part of the divine cult where it fulfils precise functions. The Apostle for people, the great Paul, places religious music at the same level as spoken prayer, considering them to be identical: “I will pray with my spirit, but I will also play with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Dediu, *Symposium dedicated to the Romanian lied*, Braşov (program), 2003, p17-19, [our translation].

<sup>4</sup> Augustin Păunoiu, *Ziarul Lumina [The Light Newspaper]*, 2009 Retrieved from <http://ziarullumina.ro/cantarea-bisericeasca-fixeaza-cel-mai-bine-invatarea-dogmatica-si-traditia-crestina-37409.html>.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 14, 15.

## 2. Elements of Christian spirituality in the vocal music of Romanian composers

In respect to Romanian vocal-chamber music pieces from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> c. - the soloist repertoire for soprano, it is worth mentioning a creation by Doru Popovici, Byzantine Hymn for the Virgin Mary op.125, but also Felicia Donceanu's compositions – Prayer to the Virgin Mary for soprano and chamber ensemble, Prayer with lyrics by Mihai Eminescu, for soprano, piano and semantrone, Stabat Mater - for voice and harp, Salve Regina - for soprano and piano, and Our Father for soprano, bells, cello and piano.

Felicia Donceanu, born in Bacău on 28 January 1931, is a great Romanian contemporary composer, who won many prizes and awards along her career, a lady of Romanian music, loved by interpreters, instrumental performers, and conductors. She loves art, painting, dance, and in her creations she emphasizes the Romanian spirit and traditional values.

Her presence and depth convey joy and happiness which elate and attract the listener. Her creations are lieder for voice and piano accompaniment, choral and vocal-symphonic pieces, but also compositions for orchestra.

Natural and feminine in the sense of the authentic beauty of Romanian women, she loves traditional Romanian art and folklore and to communicate what she experiences. Having ancestors also in Bucovina, a land with a rich history and a strong religious feeling, the author of the *Prayer* resonates, not by accident, with the poems of our national poet Mihai Eminescu and creates an inspiring work for voice, piano and semantron, a prayer for the Holy Mother and Virgin Mary.

Travelling to Moldova and Bucovina in our minds, to this natural area of amazing and overwhelming beauty, where the wind blows over the mountains and forests, the birds sing and the rivers murmur, below an infinite sky full of stars in the middle of the night or under the clear sun light during the day, in God's sacred harmony, we can enter more easily the atmosphere of the *Prayer*.

But the words, uttered from the outside most of the times, can be hard to understand unless they are lived and interpreted in the context of a music composition. The same is true for the *Prayer* lied, which we interpreted during many recitals on various scenes, even in holy places; it is improper to call this composition a lied, it is better to simply call it Prayer!

Talking about this creation and other similar ones, the composer herself stated at the Symposium dedicated to the Romanian lied, organized in Braşov: "I give very few indications, I believe my scores are transparent

because if you cannot understand the message from the poet's words and mine, what is the point of adding many indications? Everything must be transparent from the music. Through poetry, through art, through music, we have access to eternity, perhaps not so much the creators, but the ones who love."(2003)[our translation].

From Carmen Petra Basacopol's musical creation we selected for this research Prayer for soprano and piano op.146 no. 2, Axion - Recitative The Angel has called, From David's Psalms op. 84 (eight lieder cycle), but also Kyrie Eleison - Poemes pour soprano et piano op. 122, lyrics by Paul Verlaine, and Mystical Poems for voice and clarinet op. 139, lyrics by Paul Verlaine. Nicolae Bretan is the author of a work entitled Mother of God (Ave Maria) for soprano and piano, whereas Șerban Nichifor composed Poem - Ave Maria for soprano and organ (1987) and Poem - Ave Maria for soprano and piano.

*Poem for Madonna from Neamț* by Liana Alexandra (27 May 1947-9 Jan. 2011), lyrics by the Belgian poet Eugene van Itterbeek (1934-2012) is a vocal-chamber composition, a lied for soprano and piano dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In addition, the composer also wrote *Poem for Romania* using the lyrics of the same Belgian poet.

"Liana Alexandra is considered the most important Romanian composer of her generation. Her composition style is rich, from the random technique and that of clusters to the very lyrical inspired by folklore elements from her native culture" – quote from the American press. The friendship between the composer and the Belgian writer (who relocated to Romania in 1994, to Cîsnădioara, near Sibiu) led to the creation of the two poems. The writer was deeply influenced by the Romanian culture and spirituality which allowed him to find a new dimension of his life.

The musical score is written under the form of a lied with four parts ABABA, with artificial modal diatonic structures. In addition, the composition lacks metronymic indications, or indications concerning the tempo, nuances, measures, etc., thus showing the freedom the composer gives to the interpreter.

The message is conveyed through the lyrics and the central role played by the Virgin Mary to whom the composition is dedicated. After the first piano chord the voice intervenes:

The only human gesture is the touch of Her veil,  
the sweet and caressing veil  
falls on Madonna's chest. /  
And at the same time, her eyes watch me as if She wanted to tell me/  
about all the burdensome and sad pain that lies ahead of Her/

Only through Her I recognize myself in Jesus seated on the throne/  
 On Her invisible arm, only through Her I recognize myself/  
 I draw near her, and I look into Her eyes to calm myself. [our translation]

Also, the message it conveys is a cosmic one, the Virgin Mary's who prays relentlessly to her Son for the salvation of humankind. The melodic profile is an ascending one and it concludes with the climax on the D2 sound.

Madonna's words are enhanced by joining two perfect ascending fourths with pauses in which the discourse rises highlighting the Virgin's purity, cleanliness and holiness. The expressiveness of the musical phrase is underlined by its ambitus: D1 - D2 (perfect eighth).

The piano discourse supports the key-words through arpeggio chords closely connected to the celestial, warm and blessed atmosphere around the Virgin Mary. It uses eights for the vocal melodic line and fourths for the piano parts. The tempo and the nuances are warm, slow, sweet, in accordance with the gentle caress of the veil wrapped around the Madonna.

In the B section, we notice less and less arpeggio chords in the piano discourse. The written text is as suggestive as possible, and the key-words (gesture, human, sweet, Madonna, eyes, look, wait, recognize) clearly express that this is a lied dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

The final A section is written in largo and has a coda profile, with doubled values, and it resumes the text in the initial section A. The final motive is ascending, very suggestive, based on perfect fourths and fifths.

*Poem for Madonna from Neamț* is very lyrical, one of the most beautiful lieder in the creation of Liana Alexandra.

In the list of the works dedicated to the Mother of God, poetry occupies a special place *Prayer* by Mihai Eminescu is text on which several vocal compositions have been created by: Felicia Donceanu, Carmen Petra Basacopol, Nicolae Coman, etc.

### E.g. 1

**Liana Alexandra, *Poem for Madona from Neamț***

In his book, “One way”, the priest Ovidiu Moceanu states that it is a great joy to read what Eminescu wrote about the Virgin Mary, about our Church, whereas priest Cristian Muntean added: “Eminescu wrote a shattering poem about the Virgin Mary. I think that Zorica Lațcu did not necessarily borrow this from Eminescu, but it is a sweet poem, full of mystery, the mystery of God, the mystery of a revelation. I believe that the author had an epiphany” (Moceanu, 2016, p.155).

M. Eminescu’s *Prayer* was published posthumously:

Shine on me, sweet light, /  
Just like in my old dream; /  
Oh, Holy Mother, forever Virgin, /  
Let the night of my thoughts come over me //.  
But do not let my hope die/  
Although mine is the guilt;/  
Let your kind look, full/  
Of mercy enshrine me. //  
Isolated from everyone, lost in the deep suffering/  
Of my nothingness, /  
I don’t believe in anything anymore and lack the strength. //  
Bring back my youth, restore my faith/  
And shine on me again from your sky full of stars:/  
So I can adore you for eternity, Virgin Mary! [our translation]

In this first stanza the poet expresses openly the idea that the Virgin Mary is the emissary, he wishes to enter “the night of thoughts” to escape from these twisted, oppressive thoughts and find the light”<sup>6</sup>.

*Prayer* (Dec. 2011 - Jan. 2012) by Felicia Donceanu, using the lyrics of the poem with the same name by Mihai Eminescu, is a monumental work – like one of Olga Greceanu’s paintings. Full of spirituality, its melody reveals the archaic roots of our people and elevates us through prayer towards Virgin Mary’s holiness.

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<sup>6</sup> Moceanu, O. (2016). *One way - Interviews*. Bucharest, Editura Tracus Arte. p.155.

### F. Donceanu, *Prayer*

This atmosphere of prayer is prepared by the composer through the three introductory measures in *largo*, 4/4 measure, in *pp*, with ample chords for the bass voice. After this musical introduction, the vocal melodic line starts hesitantly, which is rendered at the beginning of measure 4 by an eighth interval:

“Our Queen, we choose you, we kneel and pray/  
Rise, deliver us from the evil which haunts us”. [our translation]

The eights and sixteenths chords for the soloist melodic line – sign of precipitation and inner torment –, but also fourths and half notes (create the feeling of space, immensity and divine almighty power, for the accompanying melodic line and throughout the duration of the musical discourse).

Also, for the two measures (9 and 10) the composer introduced, in addition to the piano as accompanying element, the *semantron*, very expressive, to underline the key-words of the prayer-*lied*: Rise, deliver us from evil, words which were repeated in the previous measures.

The middle part of the work is perhaps the most touching and vibrating, written in a *quasi-rubato*, under the form of a *recitative*:

“We, who by God’s mercy /  
Live on this earth,  
We pray for your mercy/  
The morning star of all the seas;  
Hear our prayers/  
Queen of all the angels”. [our translation]

The last measures return to the initial melody, the composer asks the interpreter for nuances from mp to possible pp, in largo, with values from an eighth to a full chord (on the word MARY, on the sound F3), creating a deep emotional state, immediately followed by the silence signaled through a pause with a crown. This is also the end of the prayer, a hush prayer, which gives us, humans, faith in Virgin Mary – our emissary to God.

From the younger generation, we would like to mention Livia Teodorescu who composed the Annunciation – Cantata for bass, soprano, chord orchestra and 4 horns, as well as Ana Szilagyi who became a part of the history of the genre through Purificazione and Terra di pianto, lyrics by Antonio Mazzo for soprano and piano.

Dan Dediu composed Wolfiana as a cycle of lieder, lyrics by Șerban Codrin. In the Romanian inspired creation, we can place Tiberiu Brediceanu’s compositions – carols for voice and piano, and Emil Monția’s – carols for voice and piano. The vocal creation is marked by Valentin Teodorian’s inspired composition, Jesus’ Small Cradle, but also by Laurențiu Profeta’s art including arrangements of small carols. Paul Constantinescu’s byzantine inspired creation was crowned by the composition of the short religious song entitled The Lord’s Birth.

In the area of Romanian choral compositions dating from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> c., we have to mention Vasile Spătărelu’s famous creation Ave Maria (1991), but also a miniature signed by Remus Georgescu, Mother of God, as well as Ave Maria by Sabin Păuța and the works of Octavian Nemescu (Salve Regina for choir and organ – 1981), Ștefan Niculescu (Axion for women choir and saxophone), Dan Dediu (Stabat Mater for choir a capella – 1995) and of Ciprian Porumbescu (Our Father).

Among the Romanian composers of vocal symphonic music from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> c. we find Felicia Donceanu (Invocation for soprano and orchestra), Valentin Timaru (Christmas Oratory), Ștefan Niculescu (Remembrance – Romanian Requiem), Marțian Negrea (Requiem) and Marian Mitea (Stabat Mater).



On some of these scores the composers have written a dedication to “my mother” or “to the memory of my mother”, a sign of appreciation for the cult and holiness of the Mother of God.

Religious music or religion inspired music (such as the one we are referring to) can take many shapes: vocal, choral, instrumental and vocal-instrumental, but the Orthodox Church adopted in its cult only vocal and choral music. Singing is strictly spiritual without any connection to a show or any external element of the interpretation (like in the case of the opera, for example).

The music (especially the religious one, sung as such in the religious service or inspired by it) can also be a profound pedagogical action, given the spiritual force it has over the human soul (mainly on the young one): it leads to mastering negative emotions, “to the manifestation of humanism, of respect towards God, people and the environment, to building and strengthening a civilized behaviour, to increasing faith in the divine power, and in one’s own power”<sup>7</sup>. “Church music is the sung Gospel”, said the Patriarch Daniel in one of his works. It can become a confession of faith, support and it can accompany prayer as a framework for its internalization.

### 3. Conclusions

The Romanian repertoire is rich if we refer to the one dedicated to the Christian elements to praising the Lord, the Virgin Mary, or to the creations of the type Ave Maria, Our Father, Requiem, cantata, etc. Romanian composers created works about the glory of God and of the Mother of God, displaying a special approach to the texts of these prayers. In the Romanian vocal art at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> c., if we concentrate on the soloist repertoire for soprano, the choral and vocal symphonic repertoire, we discover the following terms of reference which can be associated with the research of elements of Christian tradition and spirituality in the Romanian musical culture from George Enescu until the present day.

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<sup>7</sup> Nicu Moldoveanu, *Cântarea bisericească în școala românească și rolul ei în educație* [Church Music in the Romanian School and its Role in Education], Ziarul Lumina [The Light Newspaper], 2010. Retrieved from <http://ziarulumina.ro/cantarea-bisericeasca-in-scoala-romaneasca-si-rolul-ei-in-educatie-18254.html>.

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