

THE SYMBIOSIS BETWEEN MICROTONALITY AND SPRECHGESANG IN PSALM 124 BY ION COȚOFAN

AUREL MURARU ¹

SUMMARY. “Psalm 124” by Ion Coțofan is an example of a choral work with religious text designed for a concert hall and not a liturgical service, a sample of the perfect combination between text and the music accompanying it. In the case of this work, one cannot speak of a well-defined melody, but rather of a general dramaturgy making a subtle shift from diatonicism, through chromaticism, towards ultra-chromaticism. The continuous pendulation between polyphony and heterophony, as well as the permanent oscillation between “sprechgesang” and microtonality give birth to a musical work full of tension and drama.

Keywords: polyphony, heterophony, sprechgesang, microtonality.

Over the years, the psalm has been widespread throughout the Romanian choral music, as in the works of composers such as Theodor Grigoriu (33 psalms), Dimitrie Cuclin (*Psalm 36*), Zeno Vancea (*Psalm 127*), Sigismuld Toduță (*Psalm 93 and Psalm 133 for choir, soloists and orchestra*), Liviu Comes (*Psalm 67*), Dan Voiculescu (*Psalm 140*), Paul Constantinescu (*Psalm 39*), Marțian Negrea (*Psalm 123*) and, last but not least, Ștefan Niculescu (*Psalmus*).

If, up to the 20th century, both choral and instrumental music had been subordinated to the 12 musical pitches of the *total chromatic* or *aggregate*, due to the necessity of tensioning the sound discourse from the vocal score even further, a new technique emerged, firstly introduced by Arnold Schönberg in his works, called “sprechgesang” (“spoken singing or sung speech”). This trend has evolved until today, being also a starting point for the young composer Ion Coțofan.

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

Although this concept is generally associated with the expressionist music of the Second Viennese School, the technique of “sung speech” also makes its way into the creation of Romanian composers. George Enescu uses *sprechgesang* in his unfinished oratorio “*The Ghosts*”, but also in the 3rd act of his opera, “*Oedipe*”. As regards Enescu’s masterpiece, “*Oedipe*”, musicologist Doru Popovici stated: “the most inspired element from Enescu’s monody is the efficient use of sounds of indefinite pitch”².

This type of intonation can also be found in the works of other Romanian composers, such as Anatol Vieru (*Nocturnal Scenes*) or Mihai Moldovan (*Origins*).

The use of “micro intervals” represents another important trend of contemporary music, although they have been used ever since ancient times. Hence, “in ancient Greek music, there were enharmonic modes which included quarter tones”³. Also, Indian music used modes called “*shruti*” or “*śruti*”, which contained 22 notes within an octave”⁴. This type of approach was rediscovered in the 20th century, also emerging in Romanian music. Some of the Romanian composers in which quarter tones are used are Miriam Marbe (*Ritual for the Thirst of the Earth*) or Ștefan Niculescu (*Aphorisms*).

By combining these two types of compositional approach, Ion Coțofan has created a very special work, which displays a perfect blend between text and the music accompanying it.

Although the composer started off using biblical texts for this work, he knew from the very beginning that it cannot be performed in the church. Many people believe that a genuine religious music ought to comply with certain standards and, more than that, to observe an already instated compositional tradition. However, “may we remind those people who invoke tradition that Palestrina, Mozart and Beethoven – composers of sacred music – have also brought innovations in their works ... Even Saint Roman the Melodist, the initiator of Orthodox Church music, has also been a creator of new music”⁵.

In order to talk about the unconventional notation found in *Psalms 124* by Ion Coțofan, we must first analyze the use of such a notation in the works of some established artists. Hence, in order to notate quarter tones, George Enescu used the following graphic signs:







² Popovici, Doru, *Introducere în opera contemporană (Introduction to the Contemporary Opera)*, Facla Publishing House, Timișoara, 1974, page 158.

³ Giuleanu, Victor, *Tratat de teoria muzicii (Treaty of Music Theory)*, vol. I, Editura Muzicală Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981, page 395.

⁴ Urmă, Dem., *Acustică și muzică (Acoustics and Music)*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980, page 285.

⁵ Steinhardt, Nicolae, *Dăruind vei dobândi (By Giving, You Shall Receive)*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, page 112.

E.g. 1

 – quarter tone flat	 – quarter tone sharp
 – flat	 – sharp
 – three quarter tone flat	 – three quarter tone sharp



In the work *Orestia II*, Anatol Vieru notated quarter notes as follows:

E.g. 2




As regards the *sprechgesang* technique, Arnold Schönberg used several types of notation:

E.g. 3

 — *Pierrot Lunaire*
 — *Moses und Aron*

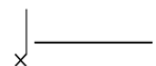

In the Romanian choral music, we can find numerous graphic signs which symbolize sung speech. Hence, in his work, *Nocturnal Scenes*, Anatol Vieru noted:

E.g. 4

 – whispered, with a timbreless voice
 – whispered, with timbre
 – imprecise intonation, spoken, yelled

In his work, “*Origins*”, composer Mihai Moldovan uses an unconventional approach to choral voices, using the following graphic signs:

E.g. 5

 — sound of indefinite pitch
 — quarter tone oscillation

As he employed certain types of notation from the works of several composers, Ion Coțofan has compiled a legend of his work, in which he wrote down all the unconventional graphic signs that he used in *Psalm 124*.

E.g. 6

Quarter tones:

- ♭ – quarter tone (when descending)
- ♭♭ – three quarter tones (when descending)
- ♯ – quarter tone (when ascending)
- ♯♯ – three quarter tones (when ascending)


E.g. 7

Sprechgesang:

- ♩ ↓ ♩ – an approximate intonation of the pitch
- ♩ ↓ ♩ – an approximate intonation, as a spoken declamation. The position of the respective sounds on the staff does not indicate their exact pitch, but also the general movement of the voice from one register to the other
- ↑ ↑ ♩ – the utterance (in a *sprechgesang* manner) of the highest pitch possible
- ↓ ↓ ♩ – the utterance (in a *sprechgesang* manner) of the lowest pitch possible
- | ♩ – the sound is whispered (in a *sprechgesang* manner)

E.g. 8

Glissando:

○^(#)  – a slow oscillation between the basic sound and the added one

In *Psalm 124*, the composer uses two types of microintervals:

1. Microintervals with a definite pitch of the sound, based on the division of the semitone (half step) into two equal halves. In this direction, Ion Coțofan uses the approach of his predecessors, Alois Haba and George Enescu, by resorting to the notation system of the Romanian composer.
2. Microintervals with an indefinite pitch of the sound, which, in their turn, can be: *glissandi* – the shift from one pitch to the other is made by sliding, so that an infinite number of microtones can be reached, in between the two pitches, or *slow oscillations* between a basic sound and another one, with an added microtonal alteration, in which case a quasi-unison shall be obtained, or a micro-cluster spanning the approximate limits of three quarter tones.

As regards the type of *sprechgesang* interpretation, the composer has set off from the idea that, while speaking, due to the random manner of attacking the pitches, one reaches an infinity of subdivisions of the twelve-note equal temperament system. However, the flow of microtones in regular speaking process is organized around some sounds from the equal temperament system, giving birth to a process of partial identification of the pitches.

In the present work, Ion Coțofan employs two types of *sprechgesang*: the *sprechgesang proper*, theoreticized by Arnold Schönberg (bars 53 to 54), and another one, closer to the recitative (bars 37, 40).

Regarding the architectural form, Coțofan's *Psalms 124* comprises four sections:

Section I (bars 1-27), starts off with an 8-bar introduction which prepares the emergence of the main theme. The sound discourse starts in the female voices and creates a feeling of instability, both because of the micro intervals (used ever since the first bar), and of the successive attacks; the sole simultaneous attack is produced in bar 1 in the first sopranos and in the *alto 2* section. The male voices are introduced at bar 7 and, just as in the soprano and alto sections, they shall oscillate between the pitches G and A. In order to achieve these oscillations, the composer has resorted to the use of *glissandos*, but also of quarter tones, thus creating a fluctuating micro-cluster, spanning a major second (G-A).

E.g. 9

Adagio

The musical score shows four staves for voices S1, S2, A1, and A2. The tempo is Adagio and the dynamic is *pp*. The lyrics are: S1: De - - n'ar fi, ...n'ar; S2: ...n'ar - - fi, ...n'ar; A1: De - - n'ar; A2: De n'ar - - fi.

Starting with bar 9, the main theme emerges in the first sopranos, based on a pentachord. This incipit leads the sound discourse towards bar 10, in which the *soprano* and *alto* voices present an example of microtonal approach to diatonic harmony – the chord G, C, A, D changes into the same chord, only stated as A, D, G, C. This shift is made through a slow sliding. After the moment of attack, the first state of the chord leaves the sphere of diatonicism, undergoing a multitude of indefinite, intermediary microtones. Actually, in this bar, we witness the shift of a chord from one state to another, through *glissandos*, thus creating an ever-changing microtonal chord.

măs. 10

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano 1 (S1), Soprano 2 (S2), Alto 1 (A1), and Alto 2 (A2). The score is for measure 10 (măs. 10). Each voice part consists of a single note with a glissando (gliss.) marking above it. Below each note is the word 'fost' followed by a dash (-). The notes are on a treble clef staff. S1 and S2 are on the same pitch, A1 is one octave lower, and A2 is two octaves lower than S1. The glissando markings indicate a sliding effect on the notes.

Further on, when passing from bar 10 to bar 11, the composer starts off from unison (G) and then moves to the chord $G\sharp$, A , C , D . These techniques in the divided voices of sopranos and altos are supported by the microtonal oscillations built around the note G , in the tenor and bass voices.

The use of quarter tones in the melody of this work is intended to amplify the expressivity and to suggest a flashback in time, to the old status of Byzantine music. For instance, in bars 14-16, the composer resorts to a melodic ramification in the male voices, which start from the unison on A , and, instead of making a cadenza on the sounds $D - G - D$, the cadenza is on $E\sharp - G - C\sharp$. Beginning with bar 21, the sonority starts to get more and more ambiguous, due to the emergence of sung speech in the male voices.

Section II (bars 27-41) is intended to produce a shift from chromaticism towards approximate intonations. As mentioned earlier, the musical writing of the entire piece is based on the polyphonization and heterophonization of a melodic formula, through successive or simultaneous attacks. Such an example of successive attack can be seen at bar 27, in the tenor and bass voices. This syntax leads the sonorous discourse towards bar 29, where the same motif is reiterated simultaneously in the female voices, thus creating a heterophonic structure.

E.g. 11

The musical score for four voices (S1, S2, A1, A2) is shown. The lyrics are "când li s'a a-prins". The score includes dynamic markings (*f*, *mf*) and a glissando (*gliss.*) in the soprano and alto parts. The bass part (A2) has a triplet of eighth notes.

At bar 30, in order to emphasize the word „rage”, Ion Coțofan resorts both to an attack in *fortissimo*, as well as to a type of unequal temperament intonation. Through this declamation, Coțofan amplifies the dramatism of the moment, by indicating only the general movement of the voices. At bars 32-33, we can find an example of unison dispersion, attained through the use of microtones. This technique consists of attacking a particular sound by the four vocal segments and of shifting – through glissando – from that sound toward four of its microtonal variants. In the present case, the sopranos and altos shall attack the pitch C concurrently; in the next bar, this unison ramifies into C, C \sharp , C $\#$, and C \sharp . The sound progression of this section continues with the same type of polyphonic writing, combined with moments of declamation which accompany the words “the waters” and “the rivers”, stated in *fortissimo*.

Section III (bars 41-59) begins with a gradual *accelerando* which leads to the *Allegretto* from bar 49. This section is marked by the domination of *sprechgesang* in both of its forms, making up the culmination of the entire choral work. In the 48th bar, we can find an original compositional segment, equivalent to bars 15 - 16. This time, the major third *Bb – D* is divided into two strata: the altos gradually lower this third by a major second + one quarter tone, and the sopranos raise this third by a major second + one quarter tone. The musical discourse then continues with a microtonal scale in the female voices.

The image shows a musical score for four voices: Soprano 1 (S1), Soprano 2 (S2), Alto 1 (A1), and Alto 2 (A2). Each voice part is written on a single staff with a treble clef. The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The dynamic marking is *f* (forte). A triplet of notes (B, C, D) is indicated by a '3' over a bracket. The lyrics 'pes - te suf - le - tul nos - tru' are written below the notes. The notes are: S1: B4, C5, D5; S2: B3, C4, D4; A1: B3, C4, D4; A2: B2, C3, D3.

As mentioned above, this section represents the climax of the choral work and it attains a blending – vertically – of the two types of attack (successive and simultaneous). Between bars 49-54, Ion Coțofan builds a sound texture by overlapping polyphonies and heterophonies, using approximate intonations as the building material.

Transition (bars 60-66). This six-bar segment represents a four-part chorale, given to the tenors and basses and it represents a resumption, in *Tempo I*. The present fragment can be called “transitory”, due to the resuming of the thematic material of the introduction and its task is to prepare the reprise.

Section IV (bars 66-100) functions as a reprise (or recapitulation), being marked both by the return to diatonicism, as well as by an expressive and dynamic relaxation. Starting with bar 66, Coțofan returns to that particular type of polyphonic writing which also dominated the previous parts. In the following two bars, Coțofan employs, once again, the technique of microtonal approach to diatonic harmony, as he changes the position of the chord through glissando.

Although the present work is full of polyphonic and heterophonic interventions, at bar 81, the composer reduces the entire sound discourse to a measure of unison, which progresses on the line “*we have escaped*”. If, in the previous sections, I was emphasizing the emergence of some melodic

motifs displayed polyphonically or heterophonically, at bar 85, this type of writing divides into two planes (ascending - in the female voices and descending, in the male voices). This diverging evolution is sustained by a double pedal (*G – D*), stated by the first tenors (Tenor I) and second altos (Alto II).

After a genuine polyphonic turmoil which appears throughout the entire "*Psalm*", Ion Coțofan ends his work with some whispering effects on the text "*the skies and the earth*", followed by one bar of general rest, which completes this descending profile marked by a *diminuendo*, starting from *forte* and ending with a barely perceptible dynamic marking.

Consequently, we must acknowledge that, in the present work, one cannot speak of a well-defined melody, but rather of a general dramaturgy making a subtle shift from diatonicism, through chromaticism, towards ultra-chromaticism.

In this choral work, polyphony and heterophony are Coțofan's preferred syntaxes. These two types of writing are found throughout the entire piece, being even overlapped, in some cases.

With regard to the harmonic construction of this *Psalm*, Coțofan only strives for a color effect, thus outlining certain states and images through the construction of the chords and the connections between them. If the beginning and the end of *Psalm 124* by Ion Coțofan are stated in the spirit of an airy and transparent harmony, in the other sections, the composer creates a harmonic density by which he emphasizes the moments of utmost tension.

REFERENCES

- Giuleanu, Victor, *Tratat de teoria muzicii (Treaty of Music Theory)*, vol. I, Editura Muzicală Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981.
- Popovici, Doru, *Introducere în opera contemporană) Introduction to the Contemporary Opera*, Facla Publishing House, Timișoara, 1974.
- Steinhardt, Nicolae, *Dăruind, vei dobândi (By Giving, You Shall Receive)*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2002.
- Urmă, Dem, *Acustică și muzică (Acoustics and Music)*, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980.

