

## ASPECTS OF THE VOCAL-SYMPHONIC GENRE<sup>1</sup>

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**SUMMARY.** The vocal-symphonic genre is expressed by employing an apparatus that includes the orchestra, the choir and the soloists. It is to be found in several instances: the musical theatre – opera; without means of theatrical expression – oratorio, and cantata. The borderline between oratorio and cantata is placed in embracing lyrical and epical aspects – in the case of the cantata – or dramatic – in the case of the oratorio. The oratorio is divided in two categories according to the text: the secular and religious oratorio. The religious oratorio has several subgenres given by the use of a pre-established text: *Requiem, Mass, Passion, Te Deum, Stabat Mater*, and others.

**Keywords:** vocal-symphonic, oratorio, cantata, subgenre.

### 1. Introduction

The term *genre* derives from the Greek *genos* – family. It is used to designate a family: a human one, or related people; a group sharing mutual features; a hierarchical structure in classification - in philosophy and sciences; in philosophy is at the ground of the definition theory (*genus proximus – differentia specifica*); in the exact sciences or the humanistic ones, the genre constitutes the largest level of some classes of objects having mutual features. The *generic* attribute underlines the capacity of the genre of creating objects in its own image and likeness; the genre is an archetype and a fundamental pattern.

In the art domain, the emergence of the notion *artistic genre* is belated, at the moment of transition from Renaissance to Baroque, but nonetheless is was used much earlier, in the Greek Antiquity, for several types of discourses linked to certain objective or configuration features.

The musical genres can be classified according to the criterion of the sonorous sources employed. In this way, one may notice: vocal genres, instrumental genres and the combination of the two, vocal-symphonic genres.

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<sup>1</sup> **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT:** The present paper was carried out within the research project type PD, code 468/2010, *The Research, Systematisation and Promotion of the Genre of Oratorio in Romanian Music of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, project director Lucian Ghișa, financed by C.N.C.S.I.S.

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In the vocal genres, include the lied, motet, madrigal, choral, etc. In the area of the instrumental genres are situated the genres of chamber music, the concert, symphony, overture, symphonic poem, etc. The vocal-symphonic genre encompasses the dramatic genre with theatrical development – the opera – and the ones without means of theatrical expression, with stage performance – the oratorio and cantata.

Another classification typology of the genres can be conducted according the number of performers, resulting in chamber genres – duo, trio, quartet, etc – and genres that require an orchestral ensemble – the choral genre, the concert genre, the symphonic genre, etc.

In addition, the musical genres can be classified according to the place, role and purpose of the communication<sup>3</sup>: folk music, religious and ritual music, popular music, ambient music, jazz music, elevated musical works.

The vocal-symphonic genre can manifest itself in various instances according to its generative structures: text, dramaturgy, etc. This way results an entire series of subgenres with related features: oratorio, cantata, Te Deum, Passion, Requiem, Mass, Stabat Mater, the symphony with choir/soloists, the vocal-symphonic poem, etc. The common points of all these species are represented by the instrumentality: the combination between orchestra and voices. Of course, opera employs the same apparatus, but due to the usage of theatrical means of expression, it represents a distinct genre.

In most of the cases, the text is the one, which draws the demarcation line between these branches of the same genre. If in the case of the oratorio or the cantata the text sweeps over a large range of subjects, starting with the religious ones, but also the secular ones, the Te Deum, Requiem or Mass having a pre-established text that with a determined sequence, being written with an exact purpose.

The cantata and oratorio represent the two well-defined instances of the vocal-symphonic genre. The oratorio is divided in two categories: secular and religious. The religious oratorio developed the subgenres: the *Passion*, *Requiem* and *Mass*, due to the employment of text with fixed form. These developed gradually using a double end: liturgical and concert form.

## **2. The vocal-symphonic genre – Oratorio and Cantata**

**The Oratorio** designates a vocal-instrumental work of various length, with a dramatic character, based on a libretto, lacking means of theatrical expression, divided in several parts, the choir and the orchestra playing an important role in emphasizing the monumental construction of the genre. A genre related to the cantata, the oratorio draws its origin from the liturgical drama.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Timaru, Valentin, *Musical Analysis between Genre Awareness and Form Awareness*, University Publishing House, Oradea, 2003, p. 37.

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The term originated from the architectural element of the cathedral called *oratorium* (*oratorium*). In time, the oratorium area became independent and was built especially for a balanced and precise sonority, both for lecture, and for singing. Naturally, the first forms of *oratorium* found there their place and would be called in the musical terminology *oratorium* – *oratorio*.

Emilio Cavallieri wrote the first oratorio in Rome, in 1600, being entitled *Reprezentatione di anima e di corpo* (*Representation of Soul and Body*). As a coincidence, in the same year was written the first opera (*Euridice* by I. Peri), thus the year 1600 being an important moment in the development of the vocal-symphonic genre. The oratorio represented a propaganda tool of the Counter-Reformation and he wanted to counteract the Lutheran chorale. Rome is the city in which the genre flourishes due to the composers Landi, Rossi, Stradella, A. Scarlatti, but Carissimi is the one who will place his distinctive mark on the genre. Subsequently Händel, Bach, Haydn, Mendelssohn will take the genre toward ever more ample and complex forms.

The oratorio of the Baroque period is based most often on a religious theme, a subject which can be taken from the Old or the New Testament, it may depict stories from the life of Jesus, the Virgin Mary or various saints (Haendel – *Samson*, *Judas Maccabhaeus*), it may evoke biblical characters or Christian feasts (J. S. Bach – *Christmas Oratorio*). The oratorio genre utilizes characters for the dramatic development of the narrative: the narrator – the Evangelist; the ones uttering the comments – the choir, a collective character; the characters proper – the soloists.

The oratorio may use various subjects, the main demarcation line being realised between secular and religious themes. All the subgenres of the oratorio have their roots in the two instances given by the thematic approach.

Fig. 1

**The subgenres of oratorio, classified according to the thematic approach**

Oratorio						
Secular		Religious				
Symphony with choir	Vocal-symphonic poem	Te Deum	Passion	Requiem	Mass	Stabat Mater

**The Cantata** represents a vocal-symphonic genre of smaller dimensions that is distinguished from the oratorio through the predominance of the lyric and epic character. Having a relatively short duration, the cantata does not allow an ample musical development, which would justify the employment of a dramatic subject.

The term *cantata* comes from the Italian *cantare*, opposed to the term *suonare*, which designated a musical piece written for instruments. The term *canto* indicates a vocal discourse, but can also be instrumental, of the type *canto d'organo*, *canto de fafari*. To the same extent, *cantilena* is already in the use of the liturgical and secular singing of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and the notion *cantor* – a professional vocal singer – is present even since the 6<sup>th</sup> century. In essence, at the level of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there also emerge terms of interpretation, practice, such as *cantando* or *cantabile*. The notion of *cantare super librum* – singing from the book – also includes the possibility of varied singing or the improvisation on a given text. The theologian Erdmann Neumeister (1672-1756) in Lutheran religious singing used the term *cantata* for the first time.

*Cantata* is in essence a composite genre, initially vocal, that quite fast became vocal-instrumental, of the emerging Baroque period. The genre comprises a succession of recitatives and pieces in arioso style and subsequently specific pieces (arias, duets, choruses) combined in an alternate succession.

From the very beginning there co-exist the *liturgical cantata*, religious, and the *secular cantata*. The *secular cantata* has a lyrical substance, allegorical, according to the context, the space, purpose or intention, whereas the sacred *cantata* has a relatively well-defined role – special occasions. The secular *cantata* is most often occasional, written on commission respectively.

In the Baroque period, the specific of the *cantata* implies a rather “intimate” piece, of small dimensions, with a vocal soloist (or two, hardly ever three), with little accompaniment, initially only *basso continuo*, afterwards a trio formula. There also existed larger *cantatas*, which included in the sonorous apparatus the choir and orchestra as well. Such *cantatas*, gathering important resources, were always written on commission and recommended for special occasions.

Giulio Caccini, Jacoppo Peri, Claudio Monteverdi, Giacomo Carissimi developed and crystallized the genre, while the Baroque era and especially the compositions of J. S. Bach brought the *cantata* to its most important forms of development.

### 3. The subgenres of the religious Oratorio with a fixed text

**The Mass** is a vocal or vocal-symphonic work that uses the literary text of the five episodes of the *Ordinarium* of the Catholic Mass: *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*. The genre began in a mostly choral version, to which were later added soloists and orchestra. The first such a composition is considered to be the *Notre Dame Mass* by Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377). Also to Machaut is owed the structure of the Mass in the parts of the *ordinarium*, presented above. According to the moment or the ones who celebrated the liturgical service, there are several types of Masses: *missa cantata* (celebrated

by the priest alone), *missa lecta* (recited Mass), *missa solemnis* (rich from a musical point of view). The term derives from Latin, *missio* or *dimissio* – dismissal, the end of the mass, suggesting the ones “non-baptized,” the ones of other faith, to leave the church, a formula which was later adopted in the generic notion of *missa* (mass).

If the parts of the *Ordinarium* (ordinary) of the missa are precise and have a determined succession, the parts of the *Proprium* (proper) are variable ones, according to the demands of the ritual celebration of the liturgical year. These are: *Introit, Gradual, Sequence, Gospel, Offertory, Communion, Postcommunion*.

*The Mass* started to be an independent musical genre between the 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, using only well-known Gregorian songs. The genre evolved beginning with the Renaissance era, important composers employing this genre: J. de Prés or Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. The era of the Baroque withdraws the Mass from the traditional liturgical song, preserving only the text. The development of the oratorio, of instrumentality and secular music, conferred the Mass genre a new turn, reaching its highest point in the work of J. S. Bach.

*The Mass* represents an instance of special importance for the vocal-symphonic genre because it was the one which standardized the vocal-instrumental apparatus of the oratorio and of the other subgenres: the quartet of vocal soloists (soprano, alto, tenor, bass), the mixed choir and the orchestra.

In the practice of the Orthodox Church, the generic term for the public religious celebration is *liturgy*. The works written for this are in their majority *a cappella* because in the Oriental rite the instruments are banned. The liturgical musical genre draws especially on the dramaturgy of Saint John Chrysostom.

The Requiem and Mass genres are derived from the traditions of the cult music, but they succeeded relatively quickly to be included in the repertory of the cultivated music, distancing themselves from their primary function, because the vocal-instrumental apparatus is important, and their expressive force makes it adequate for the concert hall. Hence, the genre will develop in two directions: the one strictly tied to the necessities of the liturgical life and the one that will evolve towards the stage performance typology.

**The Requiem** is a funeral Catholic Mass - *missa defunctorum* (*missa pro defunctis*), the equivalent of the Parastasis in the Orthodox cult. The term derives from the initial text of the *Introitus – Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine*. The majority of the parts are taken from the Mass, but leaving aside the *Gloria* and *Credo*, while *Alleluia* is replaced with *Tractus* and *Dies irae*. The resulting parts are *Introitus (Requiem aeternam)*, *Kyrie*, *Graduale (Requiem aeternam)*, *Tractus (Absolve Domine)*, *Sequentia (Dies irae)*, *Offertorium (Domine Jesu Christe)*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, *Communio (Lux aeterna)*. To these parts can be added also *Responsory (Libera me Domine)*. The Requiem has thus a fixed

element given by the text and the constitutive parts, the variety being conferred by the approach of the musical forms.

The Requiem represents the fifth liturgical genre together with<sup>4</sup> *missa solemnis* – celebrated on Sundays and important feasts - *missa conventualis* – celebrated on ordinary days - *missa votiva* – celebrated on special occasions, not being included in the common services - *missa nuptialis* – with the occasion of the celebration of a marriage - *missa defunctorum* – at funerals or at commemoration services.

Within the Catholic service, the dramatic character of the genre is increased by the mentality which exaggerates the moment of man's departure from the earthly life, by placing an emphasis on the Judgement Day, the Day of Wrath – *Dies irae* – on the tragic moments in *Rex tremendae*, unlike the Orthodox belief in which the soul of the departed must rest in peace "where there is neither sickness, nor sorrow."

The first generation of composers who wrote funeral Masses is composed of J. Ockeghem, Ch. Morales Tomas Luis de Victoria, Cl. Monteverdi, Al. Scarlatti, etc. Gradually the genre moves away from the liturgical function and comes nearer the performance form, in public concert halls. From this category are part the works of W. A. Mozart, J. Brahms, A. Bruckner, G. Fauré or A. Vivaldi. The moving away from the primary function of the Requiem can be noticed in the compositions of J. Brahms, that elude completely the traditional framework, the imposed text, the composer writing his own libretto.

"The correlation of the musical approach of the same Gospel text in several musical versions, representing different styles and eras, different schools, different confessional belonging, reveals the large sweep of significations accepted for the same text shifted from liturgical to artistic, eventually the aesthetic and the ethos gaining priority over the liturgical."<sup>5</sup> This way result new subgenres of the oratorio, which bear the title of the text taken from the religious compartment, etc. This transfer from the liturgical to the concert type can be accomplished in two ways: known melodic lines were taken and processed by the composers; texts of liturgical origin received new musical garments.

**The Passion** is placed in the sphere of the vocal-symphonic genre related with the oratorio through its structure – recitative, arias, choruses – which present the narrative of the Crucifixion on a text that is always taken from the Gospels. The Passion becomes a genre of its own at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the separation from the religious ritual, developing in parallel with the oratorio genre.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Coresi, Theodore, *Dramaturgy and Rhetorics in Christian Cult Music*, Musical Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Coresi, Theodore, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

In the primary forms, the declamation of the biblical texts was accompanied by Gregorian melodies, and later, in the time of Jakob Obrecht and Orlando di Laso the Passion will develop into forms that are more complex. Heinrich Schütz turned to music an important number of biblical texts, of which are worth mentioning: *The Resurrection History*, *The Seven Words of Christ on the Cross*, the *St. Matthew Passion*, *St. Luke Passion* and *St. John Passion*. Those do not have an orchestral accompaniment, the Evangelist, the soloists and the choir are a *cappella*, without digressions, interpretations or additions to the biblical text.

The highest point of the genre is found in the works of J. S. Bach - *Johannes Passion*, *Mattheus Passion*, but the genre had a line of development, which reaches the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Stabat Mater – sequence.** At first, the sequence represents a hymn within the Gregorian chant realised by setting a literary text to the final melisma in alleluia. Being grounded on the collective memory, the composers used to mould texts on songs already known by the people, or vice versa, there were songs composed for already known texts. In this way, the sequence enters in the framework of the Gregorian chant, influencing the entrance of folk elements, “vulgar” into religious music. As a vocal genre of its own, it will receive an important appreciation from the audience, but at the same considered improper for the church canons, given its increasingly human character. Thus, the Council of Trident (1545-1563) forbids the usage of the genre within the religious services, with some exceptions: *Victimae paschali laudes*, *Venti sancte spiritus*, *Dies irae*, *Lauda Sion* and *Stabat mater dolorosa*. The text of the *Stabat Mater* sequence has 20 verses, with three octosyllabic verses, and it was the one which drew the interest of the composers for musical settings.

**Magnificat** emerged as an independent genre in the Renaissance period, being developed and brought to its highest within the Baroque era, the most important composers who employed this form of manifestation of the vocal-symphonic genre being Heinrich Schütz and J. S. Bach. The Latin term – which is translated as *song of praise* – is taken from the text of the Mass.

**Te Deum** represents a hymn, initially attributed to Niceta of Remesia, held on some solemn moments, set apart from the Holy Mass, based on the text *Te Deum laudamus*.

**The Psalm** constituted the principal music form in the Mosaic cult. The most representative are the Psalms of David, which compose most part of the Book entitled *Psalms* or *Psalter*. They were not recited, but sung, having

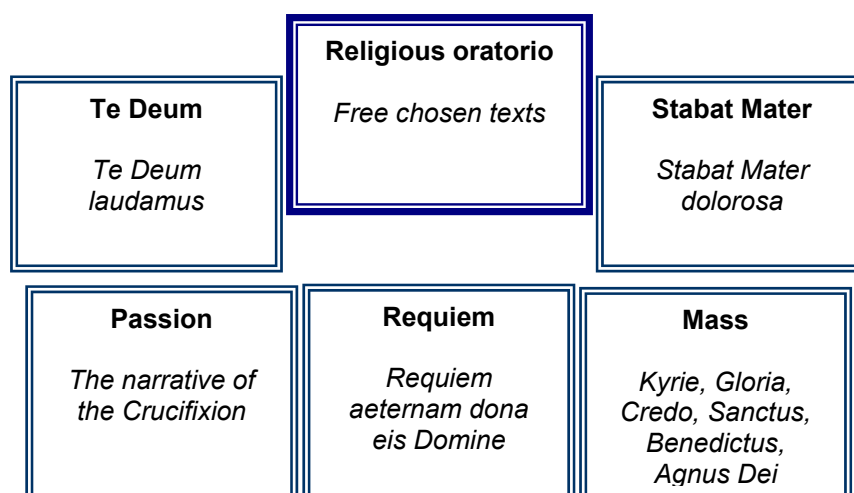
even complex vocal or vocal-instrumental forms. In the same way in which other liturgical songs were taken, the Psalms represented an important source of inspiration for entire generations of composers.

Within the Orthodox cult, but also the Catholic one, an important category of songs is represented by the psalms. Their texts formed, in first instance, a source of inspiration for the motets. Subsequently, these were given orchestral accompaniment generating thus the genre of the concert psalm. The genre perpetuated over the centuries in the works of composers such as G. P. da Palestrina, Orlando di Lasso, J. S. Bach, Fr. Schubert, F. M. Bartholdy, J. Brahms, but also Max Reger and Igor Stravinski.

Therefore, the religious vocal-symphonic genres, with pre-established and well determined text, represent subgenres of the oratorio, the differences between them being given by the text.

Fig. 2

#### The subgenres of religious oratorio



#### 4. Vocal-symphonic genres with free chosen texts

**The Symphony with choir/soloists** represents a hybrid genre in which the basic character given by the symphonic genre is enriched by the presence of the solo or choral voices, without infringing in any way the dramatic development of the musical discourse. Important composers such as Mahler or Shostakovich, the genre remaining intrinsically as a purely instrumental form, later continued the manner initiated by Beethoven.



**The vocal-symphonic poem** is characterized by the presence of a soloist voice or of a choir together with the orchestral apparatus. In their great majority these works are not programmatic, are not necessarily one-movement pieces (symphonic suite, cantatas), but their genre belonging given by the author in the title of the work or in the subsequent characterisation. Usually various subjects are set to music, the term *poem* attached to the piece having more an elegiac, contemplative reference. A special category is represented by the programmatic vocal-symphonic poems within which the voices are considered more as special timbral presences; the voices can be without text, or the text used does not diminish the programmatic character.

### 5. Conclusions

The vocal-symphonic genre is expressed in several instances: the theatrical genres – the opera; the performance genres (destined for the concert hall) – oratorio and cantata. In their turn, the vocal-symphonic genres for the concert hall are divided into two categories according to the significance of the text: religious genres or secular ones. The oratorio developed a whole range of subgenres developed given the employment of text with fixed character: the Mass, the Requiem, the Passion and so on. Gradually the genres destined initially for the religious celebration shifted away from their original purpose and moved toward their performance in concert form.

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