

**THE ANNUNCIATION
IN PAUL CONSTANTINESCU'S CHRISTMAS ORATORIO:
MUSICAL AND ICONOGRAPHIC DECODING**

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SUMMARY. This study engages in hermeneutics to offer a set of decoding clues regarding the integration of the Byzantine melos into Paul Constantinescu's creation. Nowadays, the author is regarded as a forerunner in the expansion of the psaltic monody beyond its familiar vocal tradition: both his Oratorios transform the Byzantine melodic heritage into a key ingredient of the instrumental genres. The musical rendering of the *Annunciation* (opening part of the *Christmas Oratorio*), serves as an ideal symbiotic model between traditional hymnography and the modern composition techniques of that time. By adopting authentic sources from Macarie, Suceveanu, Stupcanu, Anton Pann, but also by interfacing music with the ekphonic cantillation of the annunciation pericope (Panțiru – Iași Evangelic Lectionary), Paul Constantinescu seems to assume the role of an "iconographer": respecting the canonical norm at the melodic level while accessorising music with personal exterior elements. The *Annunciation* segment also admits a symbolic decoding: it prepares the birth of a superior integrative vision promoted by the Romanian composers of the next generations, ushering in a new assimilation stage of the Byzantine chant.

Keywords: Paul Constantinescu, Annunciation, Byzantine music, hymnography, iconography, ekphonic notation

In its religious frame, Byzantine ritual could be defined as an organic triad, comprising word, music and image in a semiotic interrelation. The text of the sermon prevails over the artistic components but provides the visual details of the icons. By extension, the music synthesizes the word and the image in a refined artistic outcome. Even when taken out from the boundaries of church tradition context, Byzantine music bears, in a latent way, the stamp of the visual effects and carries the hallmarks of fine arts representation. Therefore, a multi-layered approach is required and the analysis of a music piece rooted in the Byzantine artistic heritage should not disregard, much less discount, any of the three components.

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At the beginning of the 20th century the Byzantine melos served as a rich inspiration source for the Romanian composers, such as Dumitru Georgescu Kiriac or Gavriil Musicescu, who used it exclusively in their choir music, thus without betraying its vocal essence. Paul Constantinescu is the first to make a brilliant contribution to the absorption of this purely vocal element into the instrumental genres, starting in 1929 by his *Two Byzantine Studies* for piano trio. In the Western European context, composers of the first half of the 20th century had already taken advantage of the Gregorian chant, enhancing the expressive traits of their instrumental works. We think foremost of Respighi, who composed in 1921 the *Gregorian Concerto* and *Tre Preludi sopra melodie gregoriane* for piano. Hindemith is the second composer who is worth mentioning; he extensively resorts to Lutheran chorals and Gregorian chant in two notable works, both of them written in 1938: *Nobilissima visione* and *Mathis der Maler*.

Paul Constantinescu has been acknowledged as the first Romanian composer who challenged the Byzantine melodic heritage by transferring it to the complex universe of the symphony orchestra. For this reason, he remains as a reference point in Romanian music history. Up to 1963, the year when he finalised his last instrumental masterpiece inspired by this ancient melodic legacy – the *Triple Concerto for violin, piano and cello*, the author enriched the Romanian musical patrimony with two outstanding works: the *Christmas* and the *Easter Oratorios*, two keystones of Romanian music, shaped as an outstanding synthesis of vocal and instrumental mastery. Therefore, the present research engages in hermeneutics in order to offer a set of decoding clues regarding the integration of the Byzantine melos in the composer's music.

In order not to look too widely and thus, by necessity superficially, we focus on one single fragment as our test case: the *Annunciation* part of the *Christmas Oratorio*, based on Luke's pericope (LK. I 26-38). Since the 6th century, this religious feast has been an important constitutive part of the Orthodox iconography², which received an effective response at the musical level in the liturgical cycle. Troparion, Kontakion, Akathist Hymn, Axion, – these are the main pieces accompanying the service of the feast. In the 15th century, the iconostasis attains the final shape, with multiple visual registers, reaching the dome. Since then, Annunciation has a central place on the Royal Doors, as a diptych and plays a significant part in the Orthodox Mariology. In Catholic churches countless artists have depicted the scene in a wide diversity of pictorial representations, while the Eastern Orthodox Christianity had to follow very strict rules and aesthetic canons, both at the iconographic and hymnographical level. The limitations imposed on the artist acted as a guarantee for the doctrinary unity within the Orthodox Church throughout the centuries.

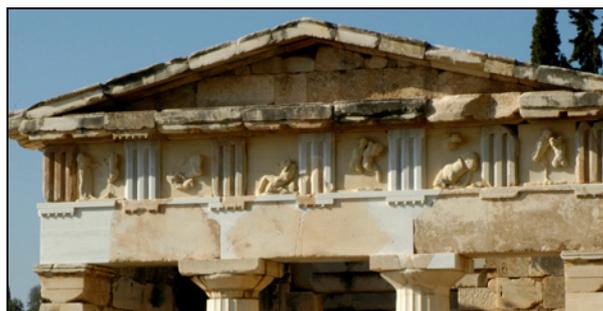
² Sendler, Egon: *Icoanele bizantine ale Maicii Domnului*, Ed. Sophia, București, 2007, p.44.

The symbolic rendering of the *Annunciation* is static, except for the case when the narrative representation is adopted, like, for instance, on the exterior mural paintings of the Romanian monasteries in Bucovina. The dynamic factor consists in chaining together the images representing the phases of the dialogue between the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, according to the following sequence: messenger's greeting - the revelation of the divine plan – the Virgin's astonishment – the angel's reply - Mary's acceptance. The narrative model, used by Paul Constantinescu in his *Oratorio*, emphasizes the dialogue between the two characters, in a dynamic composition. The articulation of the text into its asymmetrical syntactic units configures a structure that reminds one of the Greek Doric frieze. On the entablature of Constantinescu's piece, the trygliphs are identified with the intervention of the main characters, accompanied by the choir and orchestra, while the Evangelist's input marks the discursive metopes, the separation between the dramaturgic articulations.

Ex. 1

Choir Orchestra	Evangelist Orchestra	Archangel Gabriel Choir, Orchestra	Choir (Archangel's echo)	Evangelist Orchestra	Archangel Gabriel Orchestra	Evangelist Orchestra	Mary Orchestra	Evangelist Orchestra	Choir a cappella	Archangel Gabriel Choir, Orchestra	Choir, Orchestra
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Doric frieze of the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi



The musical rendering of Paul Constantinescu's *Annunciation* serves as an ideal symbiotic model between traditional hymnography and the modern composition techniques of that time. By adopting authentic sources from Macarie, Suceveanu, Stupcanu or Anton Pann, and probably stimulated by

Ioan Dumitru Petrescu's collection *Les idiomèles et le canon de l'office de Noël*,³ the composer makes a synthesis between the Byzantine modal language and tonal harmony. The diatonic modes are blended vertically with plagal and authentic cadences, with layered chords and cross tuning effects called *scordatura*. He also combines the melodic archaism with the modern contrapuntal techniques adapted to the essence of the monody and derived from the ison accompaniment. Discrepancies are discovered only in the way the composer tries to simplify the melodic substance, by removing the excessive chromatic elements and the melismatic profile. The opening fragment of the *Oratorio* proves to be relevant in this respect; the melodic line of the *Annunciation Axion* extracted from Macarie's *Heirmologion* is reduced to its essence.

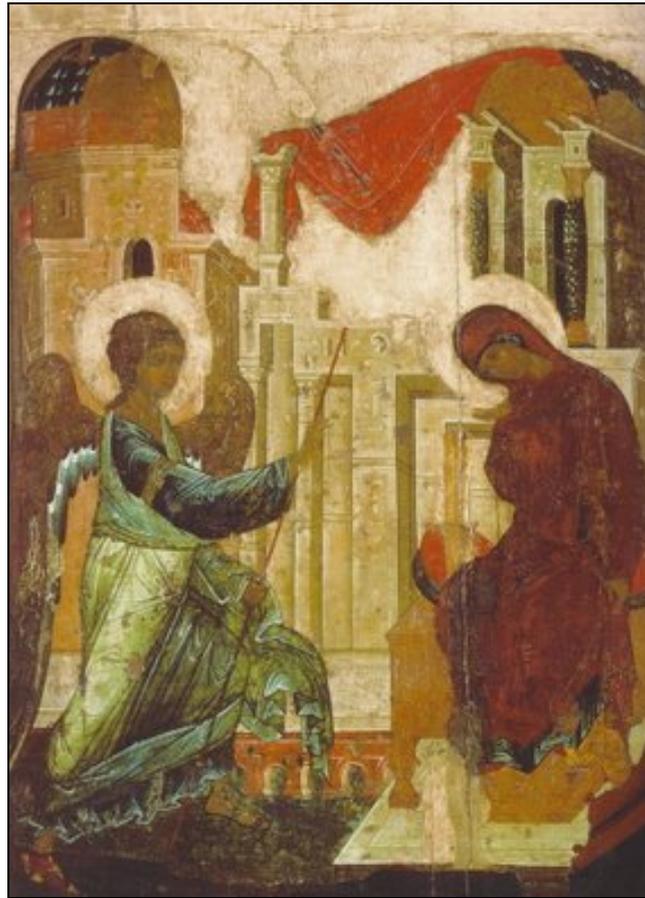
Ex. 2

Macarie - Annunciation Axion from *Heirmologion*

³ *Les idiomèles et le canon de l'office de Noël* (d'après des manuscrits grecs des XIe, XIIe, XIIIe et XIVe) was distinguished with the "Thorlet" Prize of the Arts Academy in Paris.

Ex. 3

**Andrey Rublyov – *Annunciation* (1405)
Cathedral of the Annunciation, Moscow**



The linear display of the same *Axion* is highlighted by the composer with an instrumental support which turns the *ison* into a static octave reiteration. The ostinato formula serves as a basis for the entry of the woodwind intoning reversed cells of the *Axion* and heterophonic insertions of the melody. Paul Constantinescu's attempt at creating an appropriate orchestral accompaniment to the monody is thus indisputable.

Paul Constantinescu - Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation, bars 1-13

PAUL CONSTANTINESCU
1947

1. *Axiomat Bunei Vestiri*

Moderato (♩ = 76)

2. Flaută *pp*

Oboi 1 *pp*

Celista *pp*

Soprană *pp semplice a legato*

Alta *pp*

Tenor *pp*

Bass *pp*

Moderato (♩ = 76)

Violina I *pp spicc.*

Violina II *simul.*

2. Flaută

Fl. spicc.

Clarin. sop.

Cel.

Arpa

S. (A) *pochiss. cresc.*

T.

B.

V.I.

pa - min - te de bu - cu - re; ma - re; lă - u - dați - ce -

pp semplice a legato
lă - u - dați ce -

The same concern for the authenticity of the psaltic source is traceable in the manner Paul Constantinescu deals with the recitative segments of the Evangelist and even the choir, endowed with the features of cantillation. In the Byzantine rite, the cantillation of the Scriptures played an important role in the matrix of symbols. The ekphonic notation was developed as a mnemonic device and as a guidance in the chanting of the appointed scriptural pericopes. An overview of the Evangelist's recitative in Paul Constantinescu's *Oratorio* compared to the *Annunciation* segment in Grigore Pantîru's *Iași Lectionary*⁴, underlines a striking resemblance, as a convincing testimony of the author's concern for liturgical accuracy.

Ex. 5

Evangelist recitative (bars 90-105) compared to the eckphonetic cantillation of the Iași Evangelical Lectionary

Țin în luna a șasea, lui-
 nis au fost în-ga-nul ga-vri-il de-la dum-ne-zou în ca-ta-rea ga-li-lei

iar în luna a șasea a fost trimis îngerul Gavriil de la Dumnezeu, într-o cetate a Galileii,
 Ἐν δὲ τῷ μηνὶ τῷ ἕκτῳ ἀπεστάλη ὁ ἄγγελος Γαβριὴλ ὑπὸ τοῦ θ̅υ̅ εἰς πόλιν τῆς

ie nu-mi-șă Na-za-reț la ce-cioa-ră lo-godită cu un bărbat al cărui nume era Iosif, din
 Γαλιλαίας· ἡ ὄνομα Ναζαρέθ· πρὸς παρθένον μεμνηστευμένην ἀνδρὶ ᾧ ὄνομα Ἰωσήφ ἔξ

casa lui David; și numele fecioarei era Maria. Și intrînd îngerul la dînsa, a zis:
 οἴκου Δαδ· Καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς παρθένου Μαρίας· Καὶ εἰσελθὼν ὁ ἄγγελος πρὸς αὐτὴν εἶπεν

⁴ Pantîru, Grigore, *Lectionarul evanghelic de la Iași* (ms.160/IV-34), Ed. Muzicală, București, 1982, p. 215-218.

Rhetorical exercises from the Early Byzantine period (called *progymnasmata*) indicate that a trained rhetor’s arsenal included a wide variety of techniques. Of particular interest is the homilist’s use of *ethopoeia* or “characterization”, in which the priest assumed a biblical figure’s voice, different from his own: this often took the form of a dialogue involving two or more characters, as in a proto-dramatic sermon. *Ethopoeia* was one of the many rhetorical tools, and dialogue passages in particular must be understood in their rhetorical, exegetical context. Paul Constantinescu seems to incorporate these methods in the score of his *Christmas Oratorio*, attributing to the orchestra the role of the orator. By the orchestration strategy that he adopts, the author achieves to portray instrumentally the characters of the narrative. One meaningful sample is the dialogue between Gabriel and the choir, where the Archangel’s voice is embodied by the string instruments, and the choir, by strings and winds all together.

Ex. 6

Paul Constantinescu - *Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation*, bars 110-114

The image shows a page of a musical score for Paul Constantinescu's *Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation*, bars 110-114. The score is written for a large ensemble, including strings, woodwinds, and vocalists. The vocal parts are for Gabriel and the Choir. The Gabriel part is highlighted with a pink box, and the string parts are highlighted with a blue box. The lyrics are in Romanian. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, dynamics, and articulation marks.

THE ANNUNCIATION IN PAUL CONSTANTINESCU'S CHRISTMAS ORATORIO...

Timbre colour gives Paul Constantinescu the opportunity to express in sounds one of the most distinctive feature of the Byzantine iconography: the reverse perspective, a visual convention according to which the objects in the background appear larger than those in the foreground. A few passages of the work illustrate the uncontested analogic capacity of the author to transfer visual spatial effects to the music. The responsorial segment between angel and choir shows that the main character (Gabriel) is accompanied by a reduced orchestra group of woodwinds and violins, playing *piano*, in contrast with the choir, cast in a dramaturgic secondary role, but placed in a forward position by the strong sonority of the strings, harp and brass instruments. One could hazard the interpretation of this link with reverse acoustic perspective as a synaesthetic metaphore on behalf of the composer.

Ex. 7

Paul Constantinescu – Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation, bars. 301-306

The image displays a page of a musical score for Paul Constantinescu's Christmas Oratorio, specifically the Annunciation section, bars 301-306. The score is written for a reduced orchestra and a choir. The instruments listed include Flute 1 & 2, Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, Double Bass, Harp, and a four-part choir (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass). The score is annotated with a pink box highlighting the woodwind and string parts, and a blue box highlighting the choir parts. The lyrics 'Ae - ae - na - na' are visible under the choir parts.

As in the Byzantine iconography, the composer occasionally abandons the third dimension, by compressing the orchestra to a unison line, highlighting the instrumental vocality, a genuine “brand” of the entire *Christmas Oratorio*:

Ex. 8

Paul Constantinescu – *Christmas Oratorio: Annunciation*, bars 142-150



Through his *modus operandi* Paul Constantinescu seems to assume the role of an “iconographer”. He follows the canonical norm at the melodic level while accessorizing the score of the *Oratorio* with polyphonic and harmonic elements of the Western European tradition. Used as a pedestal for the melody or as an underscore of the vocal line, the orchestra promotes free counterpoint techniques, imitative polyphony, mixtures or *ostinato*. The composer also interfaces music with the ekphonic cantillation of the Annunciation pericope, in an attempt not to move away from the typological lines of the musical ritual.

His creative efforts meet the concept of contemporary Romanian painters, such as Sorin Dumitrescu, whose elements of visual morphology and setting could be designated as iconographic echoes of Paul Constantinescu’s *Annunciation*.

Ex. 9

Sorin Dumitrescu – *Annunciation*⁵



⁵ Watercolor on paper, 122 x 96cm, picture reproduced from the Album “Dumitrescu, Sorin, *Biserici. O arheologie vizuală a creativității și stilisticii bizantine*”, Ed.Centrul de Cultură Palatele Brâncovenești, București, 2007, priest Ioan Bizău’s collection, Cluj.

As a valuable treasure of symbols, the *Annunciation* from the *Christmas Oratorio* also admits a symbolic decoding: it prepares the birth of a superior integrative vision promoted by the Romanian composers of the next generations, ushering in a new assimilation stage of the Byzantine chant. Nowadays, the author is regarded as a forerunner in the expansion of the psaltic monody beyond its familiar vocal tradition: both his Oratorios mark early steps in the direction of transforming the Byzantine melodic heritage into a key-ingredient of the instrumental genres.

The heteroclitite fusion operated by Paul Constantinescu between the psaltic monody and the western composition techniques have led to a brilliant outcome that opened a new perspective for the Romanian composers of the 20th century. The main intention of this study was to establish Paul Constantinescu's role as a fertile point of origin regarding the assimilation of this unexplored source of inspiration into large instrumental compositions. The pathway Paul Constantinescu sets, in this respect, will later on be developed and refined in an impressive array of stylistic tendencies. The whole exquisite lineage of modern composers has expanded the concept, enriched the music vocabulary and added different areas of connotation to the usage of the Byzantine heritage.

Artists of the Transylvania Composition School maintain the vocal essence of the Byzantine music as a basis for choir pieces: the Liturgies written by Dan Voiculescu, Valentin Timaru, Constantin Rîpă are eloquent models in this respect. Looking for authenticity, Sigismund Toduță inserted in his *Oratorio "Master Manole"* a genuine Byzantine chant with the Greek text, sung *a cappella* by a children's choir. On the other hand, his disciple Cornel Țăranu merges the ancient melodic element with aleatoric techniques in his piece *Testament*. The vocal line is also cultivated by the composers representing the Bucharest Composition School. Ștefan Niculescu contributes with two important titles to this category: *Invocatio* – Choral Symphony for 12 voices and *Axion* for 6 voices. The instrumental works reflect a wide variety of characteristics. On the one hand, we track down the nostalgic quest of the vocal nature in the resonance of the instruments sound like the piece *Kontakion* for saxophone quartet written by Gheorghe Firca. On the other hand, we draw attention to the large instrumental compositions which recreate the Byzantine *topos* coated in modern sonorities: the Symphonies nr.3, 4 and 5 of Ștefan Niculescu, several pieces signed by Anatol Vieru, Doru Popovici, Myriam Marbé, Theodor Grigoriu, Șerban Nichifor, Nicolae Brânduș or Octavian Nemescu. Consequently, Romanian composers have fully demonstrated their great potential in developing the trend that Paul Constantinescu initiated, which proved to be artistically productive.

The contemporary Western European counterbalance in the attempt to resort to the source of the religious music is represented by the so called Holy Minimalists, such as Henryck Gorecki, John Tavener, Arvo Pärt or Giya Kancheli. Representing the New Simplicity trend, they epitomize the extreme transparency with their music, and mark an ascetic return to the sacred. By contrast, Romanian composers tend to transfigure the Byzantine melos up to the point where it becomes almost unrecognisable. Disciple of Paul Constantinescu, but initiating a new line regarding the assimilation of the Byzantine music, Octavian Nemescu is one of the most eloquent examples, with his piece *Metabizantinirikon* for saxophone and magnetic tape, written in 1984.

Adhering to the experimental music, the piece shows the following characteristics: the melodic linearity is distorted and the typical ison is to be found converted into a perpetual background noise, which evokes George Crumbs's *Night of the electric Insects* from the string quartett *Black Angels*.

Ex. 10

Octavian Nemescu – *Metabizantinirikon*

Linear time:

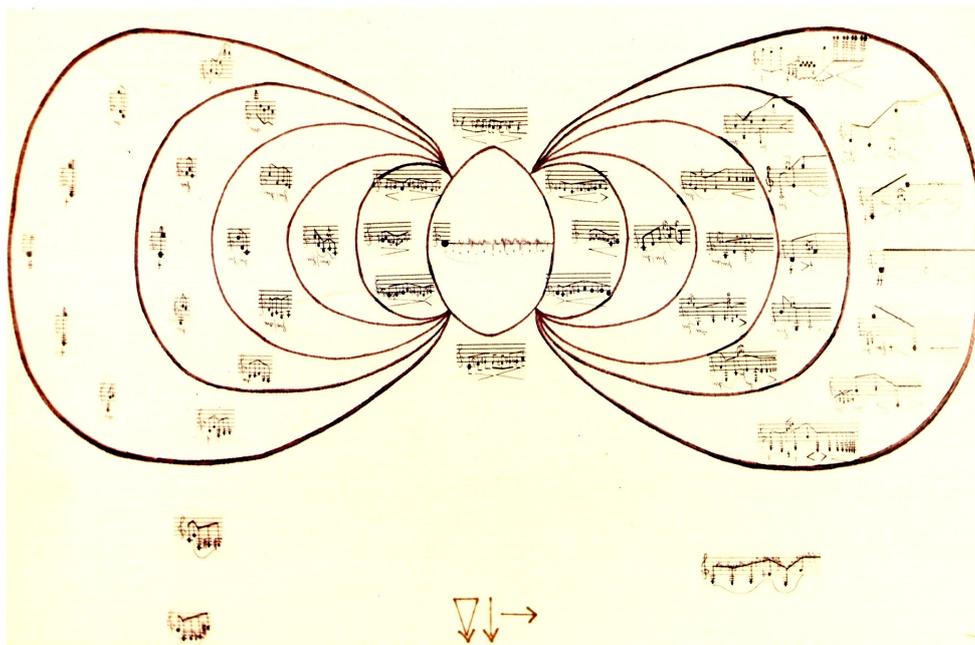
The image shows a handwritten musical score for saxophone and magnetic tape. The score consists of several staves. The central staff is for the saxophone, featuring a melodic line with various dynamics such as *mp*, *p*, *mp*, *p*, *mp*, *p*, and *pp*. There are also performance instructions like *fff* and *mf*. The score includes a section marked *3a* with the instruction *sul nas*. The score is annotated with green circles containing the number 6 and a pink circle containing the letter V. The notation includes notes, rests, and various musical symbols.

According to Octavian Nemescu's explanations⁶, the work is an attempt at creating a meta-language, centred on the Byzantine modes and cadences. The crickets' and the birds' noise is supposed to reveal the fraternity with nature, as a musical proclamation of Mircea Eliade's concept, according to which the Byzantine rite is a hypostasis of a cosmic Christianity. In his piece, Octavian Nemescu achieves a temporal „meta”-poliphony that overlaps atemporality, the linear and the circular time.

Ex. 11

Octavian Nemescu – *Metabizantinirikon*

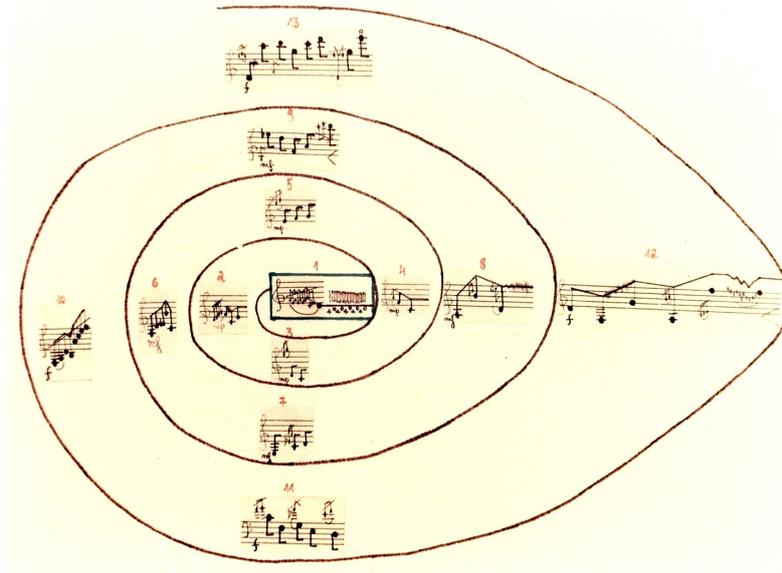
Time – egg



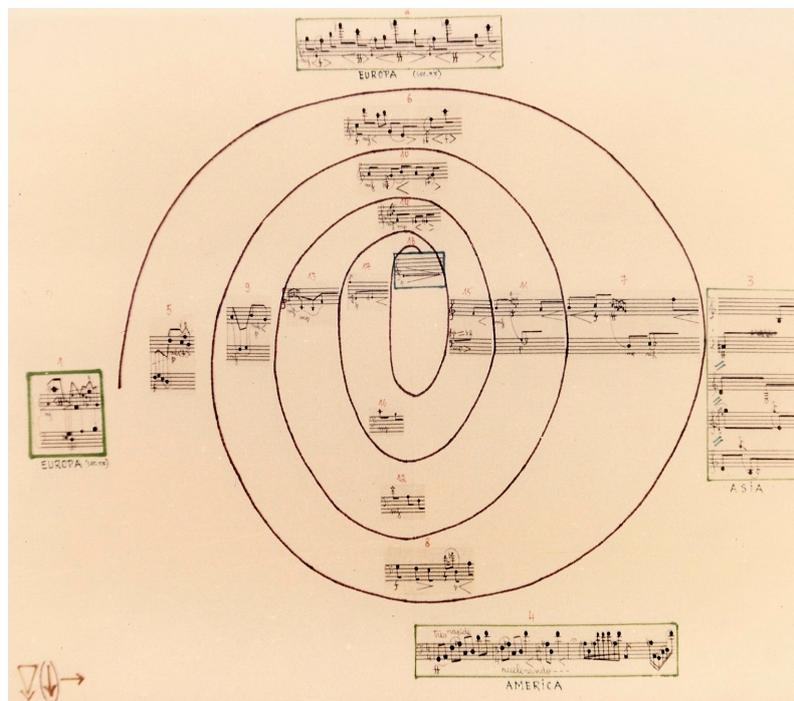
⁶ Letter sent by the author on November 28th, 2009.

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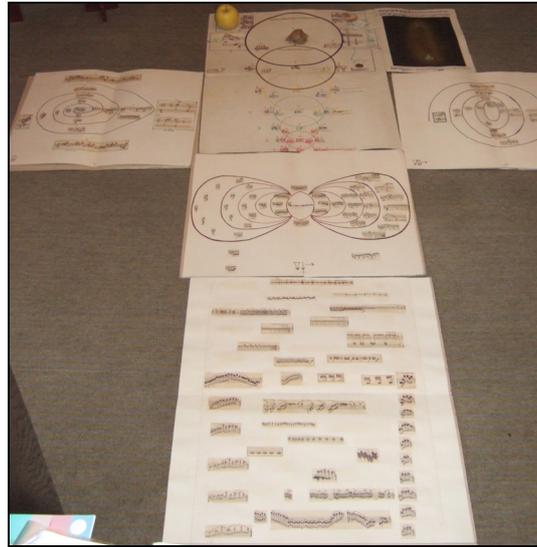
Time – seashell:



Time – spiral:



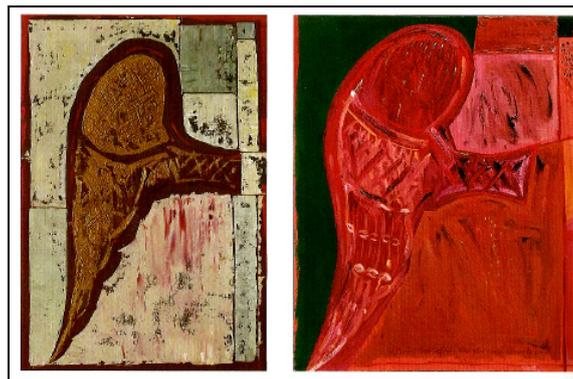
The poliphony of Time:



Looking for a pictorial correspondence for Octavian Nemescu's piece, we chose Marin Gherasim's art, which also uses, in a more abstract way, the Byzantine elements, as in his paintings called *Wings* – as symbol of the messenger Angel and *Kairos* – synonymous to the privileged moment and atemporality.

Ex. 12

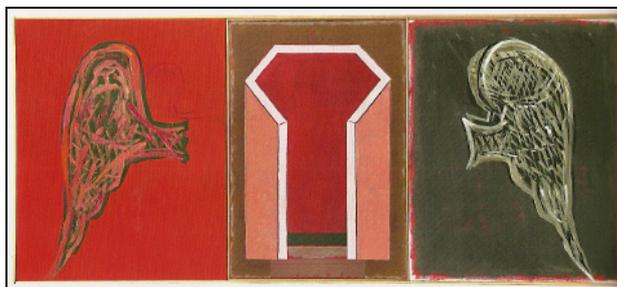
Marin Gherasim – *Aripă*⁷ (*Wing*), 2001; Marin Gherasim – *Aripă*⁸ (*Wing*), 2001



⁷ Oil on canvas, 82x65 cm, picture reproduced from the Album *Marin Gherasim*, Ed. Institutului Cultural Român, 2007, p.142, dr. Sorina Costina's collection, Brad.

⁸ Oil on canvas, 82x75, picture reproduced from the Album *Marin Gherasim*, Ed. Institutului Cultural Român, 2007, p.142, author's collection.

Marin Gherasim – *Kairos*⁹, 2001



We identify Paul Constantinescu's *Oratorios* with the primary phase of Byzantine chant incorporation into the instrumental music. The contemporary stage, called neo-psaltic or neo-Byzantine symbolises an intriguing facet of a palimpsest. The *scriptio inferior* becomes more and more imperceptible, while the *scriptio superior* advocates the originality of Paul Constantinescu's successors. It serves to confirm that the synthesis he made has proven to be functional and viable, creating a paradigm: the convergence between Eastern and Western music cultures.

(Translated into English by Bianca Țiplea Temeș)

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⁹ Oil on canvas 82x185, picture reproduced from the Album *Marin Gherasim*, Ed. Institutului Cultural Român, 2007, p.164, author's collection.

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