

# CONCEPTUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF BYZANTINE MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

Romanian culture, understood in a general sense, in all its constituent elements, is intertwined with Byzantine culture since its dawn; the appearance of the two in approximately the same historical period, their proximity, the orthodox faith assumed by the Romanian people are just some of the reasons why we cannot talk about the historical route of Romanian culture without taking into account the Byzantine cultural elements taken by it. This paper proposes a short presentation of the way in which an extremely important element of Byzantine culture, its religious music, manifests itself in the Romanian culture as the latter perceives and theorizes it in contemporary times.

## KEYWORDS

Romanian culture; Byzantine Culture; Byzantine Music; Romanian Orthodox Music;

## INTRODUCTION

When we talk about the Byzantine Empire, Byzantine Art or Byzantine Music, it should be noted first of all that the *Byzantine* term is not the name adopted by the people of the Eastern Roman Empire.

This term, coming from *Byzantium*, the historical locality on whose settlement the Holy Emperor Constantine the Great founded the capital Constantinople, was attributed to this culture by Western intellectual circles of the late nineteenth century (Wellesz, 1962:1).

Moreover, not even the name of the Eastern Roman Empire would have been known to those we call today as *Byzantines*; they identified themselves, until the disappearance of the empire, in 1457 AD, as *Romans* or *Romaei* (*Ρωμαίοι*), namely citizens of the Roman Empire. Their homeland was called *Romania* (*Ρωμανία*) or *The Roman Empire* (*Βασιλεία Ρωμαίων*) and their emperor was considered, especially after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the legitimate emperor of the entire Roman Empire (Delvoye, 1976: 22).

However, according to modern customs, using the terminology built on the *Byzantine* lexeme, we believe that we can not try a description of Byzantine music without first presenting those elements of history of the Byzantine Empire relevant to the emergence and evolution of Byzantine music.

Therefore, in order to understand the historical dynamics of this empire, we must go back a few centuries before its founding, to the beginning of the Christian era,

when the Roman Empire, with its capital in Rome, expanded so much that it practically surrounded the Mediterranean Sea, renamed with emphasis in Latin as *Mare Nostrum* (*Our Sea*).

The empire also subjugated much of Asia Minor and North Africa. The vast territory included a considerable number of peoples, but two cultures really took over as more advanced than the others: the Greek, which dominated the east of the empire and the Latin, which dominated its west. The battle campaigns carried out permanently by the Roman emperors, respectively the immense effort to control such a vast area, made the two cultures be not necessarily in direct conflict, but rather in consistent cultural exchanges in certain periods.

However, the entire history of their coexistence remains marked by competitiveness and the concern that neither culture loses its identity to the detriment of the other.

Thus, the vast Roman Empire was rather a cultural duality from the beginning of its expansion to its end, an end that would reconfirm the cultural boundaries of Hellenism with Latinity. However, if the founding of the Byzantine Empire had been marked by this end, things would have been simpler, because neither it nor the Western Roman Empire could have claimed more than the title of descendant of the Roman Empire.

But there was the person of the Holy Emperor Constantine the Great, who would play a key role in the Hellenism-Latinism (or East-West) dispute, a dispute that can be noted from a socio-cultural point of view to Europe today.

It was the year 325 AD when St. Constantine decided to move his capital from Rome to the site of the ancient Greek city of Byzantium, mentioned above, which was in a much more central position of the empire, right on the border between Europe and Asia (Rămureanu, 2004: 110 – 111). A great city was to be built there, which was inaugurated on May 11, 330 AD; the city will bear, for almost ten centuries, the name of its founder: *Constantinople* (in Greek this means *The City of Constantine*) (Rămuranu, 2004: 110 - 111).

This move, made for obvious military purposes, argued by a better control of the entire territory, was just one of the reforming decisions of his reign, which had no precedent in the entire history of the Roman Empire. Fourteen years earlier, in 313 AD, the emperor had issued an *edict* in *Mediolan* (modern-day Milano, Italy) guaranteeing the right to a free and unrestricted existence for all the religions of the empire. This edict would be a great advantage for the Christian religion, which would now prosper so much that it soon became the most important of the empire. Although he had not yet been baptized (this would happen towards the end of his life) and in total contradiction with his predecessors, Constantine the Great would later show not only tolerance but also a special concern for Christianity.

Thus, in 325 AD, under the pressure of the first great current of division that the Christian religion faced after leaving the catacombs, the Holy Emperor would convene at Nicaea the first great Ecumenical Council that not only reaffirmed and solemnly fixed the Christological doctrine of the Church but also organized church life

in order to further strengthen its position in the Empire (among other things the date of Easter is calculated in accordance with the decisions of this Synod).

The consecration of Constantinople as the new capital was therefore to be the founding act of a new empire that, interestingly, would exist *de facto* only in 395 when Emperor Theodosius, one of Constantine's successors, shortly before his death, divided the empire in its two components, the Latin and the Greek, the first belonging to his son Honorius and the second, the Greek, to his son Arcadius (Rămureanu, 2004: 117).

This act reaffirmed a Latin-Greek cultural boundary that existed from the beginning and left both empires with the desire - at first unconfessed - to fully assume the title of **The Roman Empire**. The Latins invoked on the one hand the ancient capital of Rome and its entire tradition and the Greeks, on the other hand, invoked Constantinople as *The New Rome*, an absolutely legitimate act made by a Roman Emperor in office.

The disappearance, under the pressure of migrating peoples, of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD (Rămureanu, 2004: 118), will have as consequences on the one hand the fact that the Byzantine Emperor will remain the only legitimate descendant of the Roman Empire and on the other hand the fact that the struggle for supremacy will move to religious territory, where the distance between Rome and Constantinople will increase considerably. Over the centuries, in 1054, the Great Schism of Christianity, which would then become Catholic and Orthodox, was only the officialization of a long period of separation of one Church from another.

We therefore understand the *Byzantine Empire* as being *de facto* founded in 325 AD by Constantine the Great by the transfer of the capital of the Roman Empire from a Latin area to a Greek one respectively *de jure* in 395 AD by the division made by the Emperor Theodosius before his death.

We cannot speak of this empire only since 395 because since the founding of Constantinople, the Greek world converted in mass to Christianity and for the first time in a long time, under the protection of an Empire, will behave accordingly, knowing a particularly prosperous period.

Understanding therefore this historical context we understand today by the term *Byzantine Music* first of all that standard music of the Orthodox Church.

In his treatise on the history of Romanian Orthodox music, the priest and musicologist Nicu Moldoveanu said (Moldoveanu, 2010: 10).

"The term (*Byzantine music*) means the oriental church singing practiced in Byzantium and, in general, in the Byzantine Empire, to which are added the songs of ceremonial poems that were performed by a large group in honor of the emperor, the imperial family or the high dignitaries of the Orthodox Church as well as theatrical song."

Therefore, although it is most easily recognized as the music of the Orthodox Church, Byzantine music designates a more complex musical reality that includes certain secular musical genres and could be most completely defined as church and secular music in the Eastern Roman Empire (Moldoveanu, 2010: 10).

This music has its roots in the very dawn of Christianity and began to develop more consistently towards the form we know today from the third century, as an effect of the cultural flourishing that marked the cessation of persecution of Christianity.

Developed by Christians on the musical tradition of the Jewish synagogue and the Syrian influences rather than the music of ancient Greece (Wellesz, 1962: 31), the so-called Byzantine music today was, until the Western Reformation of Pope Gregory the Great, in 604 AD., (Kindl, 2007: 43) (so for more than six centuries), the church music practiced in both the East and the West.

The interference of the folk systems of the peoples from the Latin part of Europe, the political and later religious divisions as well as the different evolutionary cultural trajectory of other Christian communities (some even belonging to the Orthodox Church, such as the Russians) made Byzantine music to be considered in the present a treasure that belongs exclusively to the respective Orthodox Hellenism of those ethnic communities distinct from it but which were or are, from a cultural point of view, in close connection with it (as is the case of the non greek orthodox extra-Carpathian territories of Romania and of countries like Serbia, Bulgaria and North Macedonia). However, the contemporary reduction of this music to a relatively small religious community cannot detract from a historiographically proven fact, namely its primordial character in the economy of the development of Christian music from its origins to the present day.

Widespread practice in the Orthodox Churches of Greece, Turkey (Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople), Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Africa (Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria), Middle East (Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch), Israel (Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem), and in the biggest part of Romania (mainly in the *Old Kingdom* and Moldova but, sporadically also in Banat and Transylvania) as well as of the churches in the diaspora of these territorial divisions of the Orthodox Church or even in some Greek-Catholic Churches, makes that, at present, Byzantine music resonates on all continents, from Mexico to Australia and from South America and to Japan, as evidenced by the many videos available on the specialized sites of the World Wide Web.

The art that throughout history has given the Orthodox Church two distinct categories of saints, that of *hymnographers* (poets) and that of *melodos* (composers) struggles to this day with tendencies to anthropomorphize the spirit. This is especially important because it is dogmatically based on the principle of the victory of the spirit over the flesh (See, for example, the Epistle to the Romans of the Holy Apostle Paul, Chap. 8, verse. 7-9: *For the desire of the flesh is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. And those who are in it can not please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit*), this being nothing but the absolute Christian existential ideal (salvation), made accessible to humanity by the precedent created by Jesus Christ, who, according to the Christian conception, God being, assumed human nature raising it to more than the initial paradisiacal state and offering through this gesture the possibility of each individual to do the same - by divine grace - with his own soul, deifying it. In the deification of the human soul through the total liberation of passions and affections, Byzantine music finds its existential reason and, due to this, it

is not difficult to understand why it has always been protected with great care by the clergy and theologians of the church which has been given the particularly important role it has in the Orthodox Church, whose public worship is overwhelmingly sung.

## MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF BYZANTINE MUSIC

When we study the Byzantine music, we can easily notice three major features:

1. **The intonational system** used is different from the *tonal - functional* system of the West. Byzantine music has a different system for categorizing the distances between one sound and the next, based on three types of relationship: *smalltone* (equivalent to the western semitone), *medium tone* and *large tone*. This creates sound pitches that have no correspondent in the western system, seeming to a musician educated in the rigors of the latter at least foreign if not false (this aspect can help to argue, especially in contemporary music, an aesthetic-philosophical theory of the *false* music as a reality that describes rather the unusual, the unfamiliar, that forces the soul to escape outside the sound patterns rather than the *false* as the failure of a sound frequency target)
2. **The semi-graphic system** that appeared long before the guidonic notation and has known its own evolution, not infrequently sinuous, which is not based on the reproduction of sound pitches but on the intervals to be traveled from one sound to another, control being represented by the so-called *testimonies*, symbols of the musical sounds that are placed from time to time in the score and that indicate the sound that at that moment must be sung if the singer correctly interpreted the whole series of intervals indicated.
3. **The development of horizontal music** that is achieved through the deep melismatic character of most Byzantine music works. This aspect gives distinction to the Byzantine music from the western one, based on a development oriented towards vertical structures. This is not difficult to explain if we think of the sixth century reform of Pope Gregory the Great that would put an end to Byzantine music in the West. He accomplished this reform precisely by simplifying the melismatic formulas of church music to their total exclusion. In this context, it is easy to explain why the next generations of Western Christians - having, as is the nature of the human being, the desire to lead things to a new evolution - did not opt for a remelismatization of music as it would be meant to return to a stage prior to the Gregorian Reformation. They thus preferred the only remaining variant, that of vertical development, first in octaves, fifths and fourths, then in thirds and sixths, thus writing the first pages of the history of tonal - functional music that we know today. We believe that in the absence of such a reform it is possible that Western music has preserved what not only Byzantine music but also traditional cultures preserve: *the feeling of unnecessaryness* with which chordal structures are approached and which is maintained by the perceptual sufficiency given by the *melismatization* of singing.

A last aspect of the erroneous use of some terms is required to be clarified at the end of this general presentation of Byzantine music: that of the use of the term *psaltic*.

The term *psaltic music* is very often used as a substitute for Byzantine music, but this is absolutely not recommended.

Romanian musicologist Victor Giuleanu, in his treatise on Byzantine melody (Giuleanu, 1981: 24 – 27) dedicates a significant space to this aspect starting from the musicological analysis of the term *psaltic* that derives from *psalmody* and thus designates only one of the great musical genres of Byzantine music.

Arguing that Byzantine music was not so named from the beginning due to the lack of this term as well as due to the fact that it was known to the people as *the art propagated by psalms*, Giuleanu reviews works containing the *Byzantine* term, from the titles of Romanian classical compositions and the treatises of the Byzantinology, appreciating that none of them uses the term *psaltic* but *Byzantine*.

Considering Giuleanu's opinion from his treatise to be of real use and extremely well documented, we appreciate that a simpler explanation may be sufficient: according to the principle of logic with which you can describe a whole part of him but with a part of him you cannot describe the whole, the *psaltic* genre, one of the three great genres of Byzantine music cannot adequately describe the whole reality of Byzantine music.

It is therefore advisable to use the term *Byzantine* referring to this kind of music; the term *psaltic* being reserved exclusively for works belonging to this genre of Byzantine music.

## **BYZANTINE MUSIC IN A ROMANIAN CULTURAL CONTEXT**

Located on the border between East and West, Romanian Culture has managed over time to establish itself as a standard of mediation between these two spaces, so different today. It demonstrates, through its very existence, not only the possibility of the two worlds to coexist but more, to work harmoniously together and to give - through this - the birth of new cultural typologies. These, far from being artificial and hybrid, not only enrich the cultural space of humanity but also demonstrate that the common roots of European civilization, indisputably in the ancient Greek world, are stronger than subsequent separations, which occurred over centuries of independent evolution of one culture over another.

The music of the Romanian Orthodox Church, observed both diachronically and synchronously, is one of the main elements of the set of factors that give Romanian culture the status of mediator between East and West.

Moreover, this music manages, along with the music of the Serbian Orthodox Church, to unify another axis, north - south, which is represented on the one hand by the Russian Orthodox culture (promoters almost exclusively of the church choir and western tonal music) respectively Greek Orthodoxy (promoters, except for small areas of Bulgaria, exclusively of contemporary Byzantine music). This is achieved by the fact

that, naturally, since their appearance in time, the music of Romanian Orthodoxy has managed to adopt all musical styles accepted by the Church: first, Byzantine music, then, its own musical variants (which appeared and exists to this day in the historical regions of Banat, Transylvania, Crişana and Maramureş) and later, at the beginning of the 18th century, the western choral music. This type of cultural approach exists naturally only in Romanian culture. It must be noted as well the case of Serbian Orthodox Church, but there, one of these elements specified above, the Byzantine music, it was introduced artificially, in the second half of the twentieth century, under the influence of the academic environment, after a long period in which, in Serbian Church, was sung only the national church music or choral music.

In other words, the Romanian Orthodoxy is the only one in the world where all the musical genres of the Orthodox Church (the Byzantine, the local and the choral) coexist spontaneously and this has given to the universal culture some interpenetrations that cannot be found in any other cultural space.

Of these, the most important are the harmonization (whether modal or even tonal in the early attempts of Romanian composers) of Byzantine music and its adaptation to the Western choir and the transcription of Byzantine music from neumes to Western notation, not only for scientific purposes, in treatises but also for practical purposes, to be used in the church lectern.

The Romanian Byzantine music singers generally know and adhere to the idea that it can not be transcribed with absolute accuracy in another semi-graphic system and it is best to perform using scores written in neumatic notation but, since the step towards transcription was made in the current context of a much easier access to information and computer programs for sound spectral analysis that can clarify, through laboratory analysis, the true correct intonation of Byzantine music, it is believed by many that this topic, of musical transcription of Byzantine music in western notation, is not yet clarified fully, any new scientific attempt to do so is welcome as long as understands that the work of the forerunners of this field, great names of Romanian culture such as Nicolae Lungu, Nicu Moldoveanu or Sebastian Barbu - Bucur, is not finished but needs to be corrected or updated but a valuable legacy of their courage to venture into the unknown. This legacy must be carried forward in full respect of the original idea, in order to prevent its loss in time.

The present scientific approach can be argued by the fact that important musicologists (themselves who have leaned over time on the subject) have highlighted the fact that improvements can still be made to the process of interpreting the neumes and their transcription. One of them, Grigore Panţiru, in one of the fundamental treatises on Romanian Musical Byzantinology (Panţiru, 1971: 5) wrote:

"We recognize that there are still many unknowns, probabilities and difficulties in deciphering musical texts. Some issues are not yet definitively resolved, others only partially, or are still in the stage of contradictory discussions. A lot of work and a lot of patience is required for the latter. Their solution, in the future, belongs to the young generations of researchers (...)"

It is true that in the spirit of the above, one must never forget that the main recipient of the transcription process is the lectern singer. This fact considerably

complicates the scientific process because it reduces to the exclusion the possibility of using too sophisticated elements of contemporary musical semiography, but this is how the second desideratum of transcribing Byzantine music in handlebar notation is achieved, namely to allow its dissemination to a wide audience, as varied as possible, not only to be interpreted but also to be used as a source of inspiration in modern compositions.

Its value as a compositional archetype has been noticed over time by many researchers. Among them, one of the most explicit and complete statements was made by the great Romanian musicologist Victor Giuleanu, in his treatise *The Byzantine Melody* (Giuleanu, 1981: 5), another fundamental volume of the Romanian Musical Byzantinology:

"The last ten centuries seem to have exhausted - in the field of universal musical creation - everything that the Gregorian cantus planus, the Protestant choir, the Italian madrigal, the French chanson or the German lied could offer. As a consequence, nowadays, more and more views of universal composition are directed towards less explored musical sources of inspiration, such as the archaic musical systems or exotic ones, and generally towards those sources that keep the attraction of the original, but whose expressive valences are still asleep - in a latent state -, waiting for a natural refreshment through the means available to today's art creator. A less explored and capitalized field is, of course, the music of the East, and within it, the Byzantine melody (...)"

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In conclusion, we notice that the presence of Byzantine music in Romanian culture extends far beyond the borders of the Orthodox Church. The constant and consistent preoccupation of the Romanian musicologists to transcribe it on Western notes led in contemporaneity exactly to the desideratum desired by the latter: to make Byzantine music more accessible to a wide audience, formed not only by church music enthusiasts who do not know to read the Byzantine neumes but also to classical composers interested in using it as a source of inspiration. Through these efforts, we can consider that a real school of compositional thinking has been formed in Romania, which is concerned with the way in which Byzantine music can be used as a source of inspiration in contemporary compositions. Starting with Paul Constantinescu and his *Byzantine Oratorios*, we can almost speak of an extremely clear theorization of the most appropriate ways of harmonizing and compositional use of this type of music in classical context.

Byzantine music, therefore, accompanies the Romanian culture since its origins and manifests itself substantially even today in Romanian culture, facilitating not only the preservation of this genre in the church or extremely elaborate musicological research on it but also the emergence of a Romanian compositional current with relevance to universal music.

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