

ASPECTS OF CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN HYMNOLOGY

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1. The Hymn as an expression of worship

Since time immemorial people started thinking about eternity, creating the most beautiful forms of artistic expression towards the Creator.

During the Antiquity, worshipping the divinity was considered a sacred act, stringently necessary for terrestrial existence as well as for what follows after death. Worshipping Yahve or other gods, the people have understood their dependence on a superior entity, to whom they dedicated all their existential efforts. The spirituality acts materialized in artistic forms, in order to venerate the divinity, to whom people, since time immemorial, have brought tribute the most beautiful HYMNS and everything they could think of as most generous, thus creating the ARTISTIC BEAUTY. The *katharsis* – purification of ardour by means of tears, most of the times with the help of *mimesis*, represented, from an artistic perspective, a successful ceremony created according to the Greek ethos which focused on shaping human character by means of art. Repeating the artistic moment in order to obtain the same effect, it became a good habit, and after a few generations it turned into a tradition. As tradition means respect for the model generations, as well as a guarantee for obtaining a particular effect, the *ceremony* itself perpetuated even after the social circumstances were changed, though they could not offer the same emotional frame for the ceremony. For this reason, tradition, be it musical or from any other cultural field, is separated from its initial message, being, sometimes, a form without content.

Christianity is born in the middle of the Hebrew society. The message of salvation for the entire world is proclaimed by a Jew, Jesus Christ, whose family tree ties him to King David, the greatest hero Israelite hero, king, poet and hymn composer.

For all these reasons the first Christians respected the Jewish traditions in music, in worship and continued to live and to worship in the same way. Even the roots of the new belief were taken from antique traditions and constantly referred to Jewish writings, that is the prophecies that came true by the arrival of the Messiah. The place that music has in Jewish life – ties Christianity to Judaism, continuing its religious music.

II. Art in worship

Aristotle defined art as being the human capacity to create. For the people in Antiquity, any manifestation of human creativity such as building ships, making shoes, healing, governing the state – is described as art. Creativity is part of the essence of human capacity to work, to be productive and to serve society, and the Christian moral added to this need of internal representation, the idea of serving God by serving one's fellows.

What we call art, music, literature, painting, sculpture, was also appreciated in the Middle Ages, but it was on the same level as any other human activity. Many of the impressive works from this period were not signed, the artist being convinced that all they had to do was use their talent, thus being useful to society that is serving the others, especially God, to whom they dedicated their artistic work. The same thing happened with Johann Sebastian Bach, the great pre-classical composer, who, having signed all his works with the initials of the dictum SOLI DEO GLORIA (SDG), meaning THANKS BE TO GOD! was forgotten by his followers. He was rediscovered by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, much later, who rendered Bach to human culture. The artists were not preoccupied to express themselves without fail, but to do good, to make themselves useful. Such a conception delivers art of elitist associations that separate art from usual life. All the fields of human activity imply art,

all the more the field of spiritual life, dedicated to a moment of communication with God by means of hymn and prayer.

III. Divine Worship Services – as specific cultural act

The capacity of art to communicate the Gospels is probably the most important religious function, both as a worship service and as a secular frame. Art is asserted by the Scripture, and the Christians were always involved in art. How should art be used in Church?

The works of art exist in themselves as objects of beauty. Considering art only a means for attaining a purpose, may seem that we lose the essence as far as art is concerned. Still there is a way in which religious art, as well as all the prayers and evangelists, have to give up its natural autonomy in the act of obedience to God. Frankly speaking, worshiping is exactly what the Christians do when they gather as a body of believers before God in order to pray, to praise Him and to receive His Word. The universal church used art in different ways. Despite all controversy that art generated, the different traditions, insisting on the different aspects of the Christian truth, agree on a deeper level than acknowledged.

Attentively presenting the limits of art, the Bible creates a place for beauty. The way beauty is perceived is valuable in itself and it can fulfill people's lives, opening their eyes to see the beautiful things created. A painting, a song or a poem can bring a spark of light. Art can discover spiritual truths and express them in a penetrating way. It is explicable why the Church always used art in one way or another. From the majestic symbolism of the cathedrals to the universal practice of using music for praise and worship before God, the Christians always expressed their beliefs in esthetic forms, creating specific forms of culture.

Preserving the past is a supreme duty towards the ascending generations and each nation assumed its role of carrier of identity through culture. Culture has the status of patrimony and binding agent of generations, and the artistic element can build up the most efficient way of communication between past and present. It is a depository of feelings and broadcaster of knowledge. All the cultural documents are undoubtedly evidence of a particular way of manifestation, thinking, feeling.

Thus analyzing the cultural dimension, we also take into account the fact that a people is made up of heterogeneous groups of people, that are constituted in smaller social entities, institutions, or social groups, by choosing certain common value systems or by having common interests. Customs that became traditions define a social behaviour that was adapted to the needs of cultural expression. Certain social groups, declaring their belonging to a certain system of values have also shaped certain specific artistic, religious, intellectual manifestations, which separate them from other value systems. These diversities delineate the first differences. The cultural differences can be noticed even within the same group, in different historical periods.

Culture changes from one period to another within the same country or province, city or community, the same way the contemporary lifestyle is different from the one 50 years ago.

The forms of expression develop all the time out of the need to communicate efficiently and relevantly with the present culture.

IV. Faith and song

Music is a cultural component present in contemporaneity, owing to which concerts and festivals that contain different types of bands from different places are organized.

The relation between the word and the musical sound represents the most important part in this paper. The development of music in Romanian churches was made as a natural consequence of the traditions and customs rooted in the conscience of this people. Even Father Teoctist, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, noticed the importance of

music – especially that of choral music (Catavasier or Octoihul mic, printed with the approval of the Holy Synod, 12th Edition, Biblical and Mission Institute Publishing House of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Foreword, page 7):

“Hymns were always, as it was very nice said, faith sung. Some of them were called poetic sermons or lyrical sermons that contain the whole doctrine. By their nature and purpose, church hymns represent an easily understandable theology for any believer. That is why, the canticle, interesting and very beautiful, always fulfilled a very important role in building the spirituality of the believers. It constituted and constitutes the most important means to fulfill the ministration and doxology and to keep the believers around our ancestral altars, being a way to convince, to build up and to defend the true faith”

The associations, foundations, films, the radio, the television and all the similar institutions of the mass-media contribute to shaping and spreading the culture specific to the contemporary society or to some specific social groups that also concur to shaping the cultural phenomenon.

The value system of the Romanian Christian evangelical thinking is one that formed its own line, being developed on the sinuous paths of a country which declares itself as faithless.

The faith and the praise, the two dimensions of the Romanian soul have undergone a special width within the movement of revival of the Orthodox Church, in 1922-23, when father Iosif Trifa, a man of poetic structure, gave them a new impulse.]The magazines that were published for the people in Ardeal, between 1920-1930, also published many patriotic poems, and the choral reunions as well as the band reunions organized concerts that were famous for their artistry, but, father Trifa was desperate because of the lack of spiritual depth of these organizers, as the art was entirely earth-bound. That is the reason why he organized a religious praise and poetry contest, promoting a hymn of the Lord’s Army, offering a 2 dollars prize.

“This magazine still gathered a Lord’s army that calls people to decide for a new life, that can lead to defeating all evil... We need a “march” song, a praise that should express our calls and in its sound we should fight against our sins.”

(Iosif Trifa, sheet *Lumina Satelor*, no.40, 12 Oct. 1924)

His try managed to start a fire, that lid a great fire, out of verses and songs. Our people, the people of poetry and song, gave birth not only to a hymn, but to a multitude of hymns that, in time, were collected in praise books. Tens, hundreds and then thousands, the hymns have grown in number, but also in quality.

Nicolae Moldoveanu, Romanian poet and writer, a remarkable figure for the national evangelical hymnology asserted himself in the contemporary Christian fraternity, once he signed the hymns he created for the glory of the Lord, their number approaching seven thousand. The 19 volumes of SONGS TO GRACE already published with the score conceived by the author, other nine volumes of songs without scores, only the text, as well as the volume that is about to be published at present and another, that the composer is still working at make us think of him as the most proficient composer still alive. All these artistic works will contribute to the development of the cultural repertory of those who will have taken it and transmitted it orally or by recordings on magnetic tape, or by manuscripts or by the volumes edited and published after 1990. Nicolae Moldoveanu makes of his music wings of grace that should carry the mission of the Gospel of Lord Jesus.

Evangelical music, in fact, is the Song of praise and the Spiritual Song, that the Bible clearly mentions: Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16, a music of peace and rest, as our salvation is in peace and rest (Isaiah 30:15). (A word at the beginning, The Lord’s Songs, vol.1)

The activity of Nicolae Moldoveanu as a composer knew an appreciated spread in the entire fraternity, by the presentation of the poems, songs and articles that appeared in the

magazines and the issues of the time, until 1948, year in which all the publications the **Lord's Army** were forbidden. Since then he wrote continuously, but nothing could be published for 43 years. The communist Iron Curtain annihilated any effort of public manifestation of the Christian spirituality belonging to any confessional denomination. The era of atheist propaganda had already begun, which made of God a taboo subject. Still if someone dared to express oneself freely, one would pay for such boldness. And the ones who created treasures out of suffering in the name of God were not few. Authentic Christians, willing of spirituality, were sacrificed as examples for those who were now receiving a different education: communism based on atheism. All those who dared think differently have dearly paid the courage to say their opinions. Still, the dark crinkles of the iron curtain have hidden so many hopes of light. Many of them resulted in true artistic works, as the hidden pearl in the shell on the bottom of the sea.

All this time I was looking fervently for the exhaustless spring of new hymns composed by Nicolae Moldoveanu, that I used to copy late at night, or to record on magnetic tape, furtively bringing them from Sibiu to Timisoara and then singing them in our church and in many other churches. We were also chased by the security for these activities and we bore the consequences, which however can not be compared to the ones the composer experienced. In the 70s and 80s I used to travel to Sibiu only in order to copy notebooks of hymns. Later, I also used the modern means of recording them on magnetic tapes, however I copied the notes, especially for the hymns that were harmonized and written on four voices.

V. Contemporary hymnology

Beginning with the year 1990, new cultural concepts appear. We could not imagine being able to publish magazines, books or hymn scores in our country, recently shaken by the escape from communism. We had to deliver ourselves from another reality, the one that my generation lived approximately 20 out of the 50 years of communism. In the years after the revolution, we benefited from other technical possibilities, by the coming on of the Xerox and the computer technology, and this way spreading our spiritual treasures was much easier.

After the revolution, the social context permitted both composing and spreading of some new hymns, created by the younger generation. New hymns and musical influences, strange to our national context that we always were proud of invaded our national conscience, presenting the young generation new tastes, based on music and especially on contemporary rhythms. The translations of some strange pieces flooded us and changed the perception of the message in a new form. Maybe, the most attractive to the young.

Many researchers understood that we live in an era more and more influenced by the media, in which the television images dominate the mass culture. Entertainment, political information and sometimes even religion are visualized by a process that sometimes changes their inner nature.

The Christians who focus on the Word have to be careful not to give up its language in favour of the icons of the mass culture and of the forms of neo-pagan thinking, that they created. The artistic forms of the mass culture, music, cinema, video tapes, television are unbeaten in their influence. Being able to resolve such influences requires art knowledge.

The decadence and the nihilism of the major part of the contemporary art is part of the texture of our culture. In order to approach the ones for whom the art took the place of the Gospel, the Christians have to become critics and creators of art. There's need of critical sensitivity and understanding that at the basis of the poetic message in the text of the hymns there is a vital biblical study on the part of the composer, as it should be vital for any authentic Christian. The art of real culture has a profound effect on the intellectual climate.

The phenomenon of spreading of the Christian culture is worth studying for its diversity and influence. The daily meditations of the people who are devoted to Christian art, create new hymn books inspired by the New Testament or the Old Testament, thus creating a contemporary hymn support for the moments of prayer.