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Exceptional Religious Musical Pages from the Interwar Period. *Have mercy upon me, O, God!*, by Gheorghe Cucu

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Abstract

Throughout history, choral church music has embodied the ecclesiastical melodic tradition in its most refined expression. Introduced into the Romanian cultural milieu in the second half of the nineteenth century, it has continued its evolution into the present day. Distinguished composers such as Musicescu, Kiriac, Chirescu, and, not least, Cucu were active during one of the most prolific and dynamic periods of Romanian polyphonic music—an era in which education, art, faith, morality, civility, and the recognition of artistic genius were cultivated at the highest level. They bequeathed to posterity religious compositions of enduring spiritual and artistic significance. Contemporary choral writing continues to enrich and embellish the melodic character of Orthodox-inspired music within the Romanian cultural tradition.

Keywords

repentance, sacred music, composition, Cucu, Orthodox tradition

I. Preliminaries

Repentance represents a profound intensification of Baptism, supported by the awareness of a sinful life. It addresses past transgressions and necessarily demands restraint against future sins. This work of spiritual

purification strengthens the charisms received through the Sacrament of Chrismation and deepens union with the Triune God through the Eucharist. Humanity's tendency to regret its wrongdoings finds expression in heightened repentance, removing the burden of accumulated sins and opening the path for grace to act unhindered in the perfection of the human being. Thus, Baptism looks toward the future, while repentance turns its gaze toward the past¹.

In advancing along the spiritual path, we discover sincere repentance, comparable to a "baptism of tears" - a covenant through which we promise God a renewed beginning in our spiritual life. This involves a consistent renunciation of bodily pleasures, reconciliation with God, and the unique stance of one who is unashamed to confess guilt. In other words, it leads to the purification of conscience, endurance of life's trials, and the practice of virtues, culminating in *metanoia* - a profound transformation of the human being. The joy of spiritual renewal is brought to us through tears. The weeping for God is the sorrow of the soul and the grief of the heart, the golden spur that frees us from being nailed to worldly cares, elevating us through holy contrition². Whereas for the modern mind tears often signify despair or depression, in the patristic understanding they return us to Gethsemane's agony, to the foot of the Cross, to the pierced side of the Savior.

St. Andrew of Crete identifies tears with the myrrh that the sinful woman poured upon Christ's head: "*The alabaster jar of tears I pour upon Your head, O Savior, as myrrh, crying out like the woman who asked for mercy. I bring You my prayer and ask to receive forgiveness*"³. The gift of tears is a special grace bestowed by the Creator, one that must be appropriated throughout life. The water of tears is akin to the water of Baptism, for it is transformed into precious joy; spiritual weeping becomes the wedding garment of the soul, the furnace of the Spirit in which we

¹ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Ascetică și mistică creștină*, Casa cărții de știință, București, 1993, p. 121.

² SF. IOAN SCĂRARUL, *Scara Raiului*, translation, introduction and notes by Nicolae Corneanu, Metropolitan of Banat, Amacord, Timișoara, 1994, p. 144.

³ SF. ANDREI CRITEANUL, *Canonul cel Mare*, text correction by Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, Archbishop of Cluj, Renașterea, Cluj-Napoca, 2004, p. 50.

are purified⁴. This is why repentance is considered the highest of human virtues - not a finite act, but a constant path toward perfection.

II. Gheorghe Cucu: Bio-Bibliographical aspects

Gheorghe Cucu was born on February 11, 1882, in Puești-Târg, Vaslui County, and passed away on August 24, 1932. He came from a modest family, the sixth of nine children born to Vasile and Smaranda Cucu. He began his musical studies at the age of eight in Bârlad with his uncle, Ion Butoi, and later enrolled in the School for Church Singers. He deepened his knowledge of psaltic music under the protopsalt Damian Rânzescu, while Atanasie Popovici, conductor of the church choir, trained him in the assimilation of linear music⁵. In 1900, Cucu moved to Bucharest and enrolled at the Conservatory, where he studied with renowned masters of the time: Gheorghe Brătianu (theory and solfeggio), D.G. Kiriac (conducting), Eduard Wachmann (harmony), and Alfonso Castaldi (counterpoint). While a student, he also served as a chapel assistant and church singer at Dobroteasa Church, later becoming choir conductor at Brezoianu Church (1904–1932). His career was interrupted only by his studies in Paris: at the Conservatoire (1907–1908) and then at the prestigious Schola Cantorum (1908–1911), where he studied with Georges Caussade (harmony and counterpoint) and Vincent d'Indy (counterpoint, orchestration, musical forms). During this time, he was entrusted with the musical direction of the Romanian Chapel⁶.

He became a close collaborator of Kiriac, assisting him in preparing the choir of theology students for the performance of his psaltic Liturgy, composed in Paris, and working with the Choral Society *Carmen*, founded in 1901. Upon returning to Romania, Cucu resumed his position at Brezoianu Church, while also serving as assistant conductor at *Carmen* (1901–1907,

⁴ Dumitru MEGHEȘAN, *Taina Cuvântului*, Editura Universității Oradea, Oradea, 2008, p. 383.

⁵ Doru POPOVICI, *Muzica corala românească*, Editura Muzicală, București, 1966, pp. 91-101.

⁶ Nicu MOLDOVEANU, "Profesorul, dirijorul și compozitorul Gh. Cucu - o sută de ani de la naștere", in: *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, 1982/1-2, pp. 712-719.

1912–1928) and leading the Metropolitan Choir of Bucharest (1914–1932). He also held teaching positions: psaltic music at the *Nifon Mitropolitul* Seminary (1920–1932), theory and solfeggio at the Conservatory (1918–1932), and harmony at the Academy of Religious Music (1928–1932), founded by Patriarch Miron Cristea⁷. He was awarded the George Enescu Composition Prize (1919) and the Romanian Composers' Society Prize (1925).

Drawing inspiration from two fundamental sources of Romanian musical tradition - church chant and folk melody - Cucu enriched the national repertoire with original works, shaping an unmistakable style. His religious output includes a wide range of works⁸: *Liturgy for Mixed Choir* (1917), *The Chants of the Divine Liturgy in Psaltic Style* (1933), numerous sacred concerts (*By the Rivers of Babylon*, *Nu pricep, Curată, De frumusețea fecioriei Tale*), music for *Te Deum*, weddings, funerals, festal *Axion* hymns, the *Lamentations of the Lord*, the Patriarchal Hymn, as well as carols and manuscripts preserved in the Romanian Academy Library⁹. Among them, special mention must be made of his setting of *Have Mercy upon me, O, God!*, arranged for equal voices (women, children, or men) and later adapted for mixed choir. The present study focuses on the male-voice version.

III. Concert: Terminological References

The term *concert* derives from the Italian *concerto* and the verb *concertare*—“to join together” or “to agree”. It denotes both a form of artistic performance and specific compositions (chamber, symphonic, a cappella, or sacred)¹⁰. Within sacred music, the so-called *concerti sacri* were cultivated by the Venetian School through composers such as Gabrieli and Banchieri, and

⁷ *Dicționar de Muzică bisericească*, Editura Basilica, București, 2013, pp. 216-218.

⁸ Viorel COSMA, *Muzicieni din România*, vol 2, Editura Muzicală, București, 1999, pp. 124-128 and Gh.C. IONESCU, *Muzica bizantină în România*, Editura Sagitarius, București, 2003, pp. 331-333.

⁹ Stelian IONAȘCU, *Corală Catedralei Sfintei Patriarhii - incursiune istorică*, in: *Glasul Bisericii*, 2008/4-6, pp. 358-368.

¹⁰ *Dicționarul de Termeni Muzicali*, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2008, p. 129.

later by Bortniansky in Russia and, in Romania, by Musicescu and D.G. Kiriac¹¹. The latter were the first to elevate the liturgical monodic *chinonic* into fully composed or harmonized religious concerts.

Through the sacred concert, interpretive virtuosity is displayed, the role of the soloist is emphasized, and the musical work - through its melodic amplitude, nuances, and tempo - reveals moments of intense spiritual and artistic experience at the highest levels of expression.

IV. The Work¹²

MILUIEȘTE-MĂ, DUMNEZEULE GH. CUCU

mf
Mi-lu- ieș- te-mă, Dum-ne- ze- u- le, du-pă ma-re mi- la

p
Mi-lu- ieș- te-mă
Ta — Mi-lu- ieș- te-mă Mi-lu- ieș- te-mă

cresc. mf
Mi-lu- ieș- te-mă, mi-lu- ieș- te-mă, Mi-lu- ieș- te-mă Dum-ne-
ieș- te-mă mi-lu- ieș- te-mă, Mi-lu- ieș- te-mă Dum-ne-

¹¹ *Dicționarul de Termeni Muzicali*, p. 131. Also see Octavian Lazăr COSMA, *Hronicul muzicii românești*, vol. I-III, Editura Muzicală, București, 1973, 1974, 1975.

¹² Nicu MOLDOVEANU, *Repertoriu coral*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2003, pp. 351-354.

ze - u - le du - pă ma - re mi - la Ta Mi - lu -

ze - u - le du - pă ma - re mi - la Ta Mi - lu -

ieș - te - mă, Dum - ne - ze - u - le, mi - lu - ieș - te mă, Dum - ne - ze - u - le, mi - lu -

ieș - te - mă, Dum - ne - ze - u - le, mi - lu - ieș - te mă, Dum - ne - ze - u - le, mi - lu -

ieș - te - mă, Dum - ne - ze - u - le, du - pă ma - re mi - la Ta

ieș - te - mă, Dum - ne - ze - u - le, du - pă ma - re mi - la Ta

și du - pă mul - ți - mea în - dur ră - ri - lor Ta - le

șter - ge

șter - ge

șter - ge

șter - ge

șter - ge

șter - ge

ge fă - ră de le - gea mea

ge fă - ră de le - gea mea

pp rit.

șter-ge, șter-ge șter-ge fă-ră de le-gea mea

șter-ge șter-ge

Mai vir-tos mă spa-lă de fă-ră de-le-gea mea

Mai vir-tos mă spa-lă de fă-ră de-le-gea mea

șter-ge fă-ră de-le-gea mea șter-ge șter-ge

șter-ge fă-ră de-le-gea mea șter-ge șter-ge

șter-ge fă-ră de-le-gea mea fă-ră de

șter-ge fă-ră de-le-gea mea fă-ră de

le-gea mea și de pă-ca-tul meu cu-ră-țeș-te-mă și de pă-

ca-tul meu cu-ră-țeș-te-mă. Mi-lu-ieș-te-mă, Dum-ne-ze-u-le, du-pă

ca-tul meu cu-ră-țeș-te-mă. Mi-lu-ieș-te-mă, Dum-ne-ze-u-le, du-pă



V. Musicological Analysis

One of the most frequently performed polyphonic pieces of the twentieth century - especially during, though not limited to, the Lenten season of the Savior's Passion - is Gheorghe Cucu's sacred concert *Have Mercy on Me, O, God!*. The present study analyzes the work in A minor. The composition may be divided into three choral sections, each with its own melodic development. The first section begins with the bass incipit on the tonic (A), employing arpeggiated steps (A–C–E). Tenor II responds “*recto tono*”¹³ at the fifth, touching the seventh (G) only once. The movement unfolds cantilenically, ascending progressively to the fifth, then gently descending to the tonic. A unison on the fifth (E) introduces the majestic *mezzoforte* entrance of all voices in ascending motion toward the octave. The descending cantilena of Tenor II from the octave, supported by the fourth-degree *ison* in the lower voices, together with the expressive *piano* repetition of “Have mercy on me, O, God!” three times, brings the section to a solemn and elegant close. The second section begins on the upper octave (A1) in a vigorous “anabasis”¹⁴, toward the sixteenth (F1), considered the melodic climax of the work. Repeated accents on the word “blot out”, emphasized by psalmic expressions such as “according to the multitude of Your mercies” and “wash me thoroughly from my iniquity”, drive the musical discourse toward its apex: “and cleanse me from my sin”. The full vocal expansion of all parts at this point creates dramatic intensity and evokes in the listener an inner transformation - a turning inward and a reevaluation of one's deeds.

¹³ Rectilinear recitation on the same note. See *Dicționarul de Termeni Muzicali*, p. 462.

¹⁴ Constant upward climb of the melodic line.

The final section, through its dense choral texture, gradually calms the vocal amplitude, concluding with a cadential return to the tonic, a note of *hesychia*, suggested by a fading *pianissimo*.

VI. Theological Exegesis

The Psalms permeate the entire fabric of liturgical and religious hymnography. One of the emblematic Fathers of the “golden age” (fourth century) of early Christianity describes them as follows:

“The psalm is the tranquility of souls, the arbiter of peace, calming turbulent thoughts. It grants rest to the agitated soul, pacifies the passionate person, sustains friendship, and reconciles enemies. It drives away demons and draws the aid of angels. It is a weapon against nocturnal fears, rest for daily toil, an adornment for youth, a consolation in old age, the crown of women. It can draw tears even from a heart of stone; it is the work of angels, a heavenly conversation, a spiritual incense ...”¹⁵

Guided by such patristic insights, Psalm 50 (51), authored by the Prophet David, becomes an invitation to *metanoia* - a radical psychosomatic transformation from the depths of one’s being. Cucu’s polyphonic setting, based only on verses 1–3 of this psalm, is built linguistically and musically upon two essential words: “have mercy” (*miluiește-mă*) and “blot out” (*șterge*), repeated and developed progressively. The other expressions (“according to the multitude of Your mercies”, “wash me thoroughly”) guide the listener toward the apex of the work (“and cleanse me from my sin”), before subsiding in the final formula: “Have mercy upon me, O, God, according to Your great mercy!”. This progression conveys peace of being, liberation from sin and passion, and the vesting of the soul in the garment of virtue.

¹⁵ SF. VASILE CEL MARE, *Comentar la psalmi*, transl. Olimp Căciulă, Editura Librăriei Teologice, București, 1939, p. 25 (PG 39, 212-213). Also see Theodore GEROLD, *Les peres de l'Eglise et la musique*, Imprimerie Alsacienne, Strasbourg, 1931, pp. 102-103.

VII. Conclusions

Ultimately, Romanian choral art remains a constant means of spiritual renewal and of enriching the ecclesiastical melodic heritage, offering ever new existential meanings in the becoming of the human person. The biblical treasury of Psalm 50 serves as a model of restoration and of the tireless search for the meaning of life. To the composer of these pages of musical resonance—at once spiritual ecstasy and artistic sublimity - we owe our gratitude, as well as his rightful place in the gallery of excellence in Romanian polyphony of all times.