

# The Process of Standardization of the Church Music of Byzantine Tradition in Romania

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**Abstract.** The psaltic music of Byzantine tradition in Romania is as old as Christianity. The two developed together in our country and have been for centuries the main features of the Romanian people. But the various historical and cultural events from the second half of the 19th century determined several changes in the society and in the manner the Byzantine music was perceived. These changes generated vivid discussions between the musicians, singers and composers, discussions which are still present nowadays. They are mainly focused on the process of standardization which in our opinion helped Romanians guard the Byzantine tradition, though many specialists do not agree. Our goal is to point out the benefits of this process, underlining the main mission of the church music, which is: to convey the religious message.

**Περίληψη.** Η ψαλτική μουσική της Βυζαντινής παράδοσης στην Ρουμανία είναι τόσο παλιά όσο και ο Χριστιανισμός. Τα δύο αυτά αναπτύχθηκαν παράλληλα στην χώρα μας, και υπήρξαν επί αιώνες τα κυρίαρχα γνωρίσματα των Ρουμάνων. Ωστόσο τα διάφορα ιστορικά και πολιτισμικά γεγονότα από το δεύτερο μισό του 19ου αιώνα και έπειτα, επέφεραν καθοριστικές αλλαγές στην κοινωνία και στον τρόπο με τον οποίο προσλαμβάνεται η Βυζαντινή μουσική. Οι αλλαγές αυτές τροφοδότησαν ζωηρές συζητήσεις μεταξύ των μουσικών, των ερμηνευτών και των συνθετών, οι οποίες συνεχίζονται ακόμη και στις μέρες μας. Επικεντρώνονται κυρίως στην διαδικασία της τυποποίησης, η οποία κατά την γνώμη μας βοήθησε τους Ρουμάνους να διαφυλάξουν την Βυζαντινή παράδοση, παρά την αντίθετη γνώμη πολλών ειδικών. Στόχος μας είναι να αναδείξουμε τα οφέλη αυτής της διαδικασίας, υπογραμμίζοντας την κύρια αποστολή της εκκλησιαστικής μουσικής, η οποία είναι να μεταδώσει το θρησκευτικό μήνυμα.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Romanian church music is as old as Christianity since we, the Romanians, have been baptized by Saint Apostle Andrew, who preached in the area around the Black Sea, called Scythia Minor at that time. Of course the church musical art was not that developed then, and it consisted mostly of "*psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit*" (Ephesians 5:18-19), with an emphasis on the text of these chants, on the religious message they contained. Naturally, this type of chanting was homophonous. At first these chants and hymns were transmitted orally, but that was the period when the cult was not yet fixed, since more and more Christians gave their life for Christ and became Martyrs, and new feasts were added to those that already existed. This required new hymns for their celebration and thus the corpus of chants increased until it was felt the need of a reform to put an end to the creation of new texts for hymns and prayers and keep a series of fixed hymns to be used within the churches all around the Christian world. We are speaking about the first eight centuries of Christianity until the musical "reform" of Saint John of Damascus.

Of course, at the beginning of the religious musical creations, each people that accepted to become Christian enriched the repertoire with national characteristics, an inevitable action if we take into

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account the improvisational character of this type of music. We know that our ancestors were Dacians, a branch of the great Indo-European population of the Thracians, a people renowned for its musicality. This means that they may have had a great contribution to the religious creations of that time, but it also represents a guarantee that they learned and transmitted accurately the musical repertoire.

Since on the territory of nowadays Romania, the Christian faith continued to be practiced and became the main religion of this geographical area, and since there was a permanent contact with Constantinople through bishops and monks, we may say that our musical history until the fall of Constantinople (1453), at least, is mostly the same. Nevertheless, let us not forget that the Christians from the North of the Danube river have been attached to the Byzantine Empire by their administrative subordination to Justiniana Prima in the 6th century (535). Greek was the language used for the divine services of our Church until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but it coexisted for a while with Slavonic. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century on the territory of nowadays Romania there have been schools of Byzantine music (such as the musical school from Putna Monastery – 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century, musical school from Suceava – 16<sup>th</sup> century, musical school from Șcheii Brașovului – 17<sup>th</sup> century etc). These schools produced, apart from preparing psalts for the needs of the parishes, a large number (there are more than 250 manuscripts in national libraries and personal collections all over the country) of manuscripts using Byzantine notation in its different stages of development (ekphonic, Koukouzelian, Chrysantic). These musical schools taught great composers such as Evstatius the Protopsalt, Filotei sin Agai Jipei, Makarios the Hieromonk, Dimitrie Suceveanu, Anton Pann and many others. Besides these autochthonous psalts and composers, Romania has been the host of many Greek psalts, of which we must mention Petros Efesios, Gheorghe Paraschiade, Grigore Vizantie, Petru Vizantie (Moraitul).

Thus, we may conclude even from this brief presentation that the Romanian musical culture has been in touch with the Byzantine musical culture at all times, and that the Byzantine art has found a home in our country.

## **2. CHURCH MUSIC IN ROMANIA (END OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY-BEGINNING OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century is of great importance for the evolution of the church music in our country. I shall not dwell on this subject since my theme regards an event that took place in the very middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, a few highlights worth mentioning since they led progressively to the historical moment we are interested in.

### **2.1 Three Stages in the Development of the Romanian Religious Music**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century brought three major changes for the religious music. Their impact is remarkable both from a historical and musical point of view.

The first important moment is the Chrysantic reform, which was introduced in Romania as well, since we used the same type of notation. And it started to be implemented around 1820, along with another major event for the Romanian religious music: the translation into Romanian of all the religious chants, or the so-called "romanianizing" of the chants. Although considered two distinctive events, they took place together because while transcribing the chants from the old notation into the new one, the text was also translated from Greek into Romanian. These two actions were initiated by Makarios the Hieromonk and continued throughout the rest of the century by Anton Pann, Metropolitan Iosif Naniescu and many others. The process of translation and the far easier notation used for the Byzantine chants, opened the door for new creations, and for the enrichment of the religious repertoire. However, this period did not last long when a new phenomenon occurred. Which brings us to the third major event of the 19th century for the Romanian religious music. For it is now that the harmonized choral chants appear in the religious musical space. Monody started to be perceived by many intellectuals as obsolete. As every new thing, choral music started to be

appreciated by more and more people, it was considered a feature of the cultural progress and it was vastly introduced throughout the country. Musical schools were founded, such as the Conservatory from Iassy in 1860, and there were a lot of choirs that began to perform during the religious services in various churches. This situation was also possible because many of the schools that taught Byzantine music were closed. Most of them functioned within monasteries which had the financial power to support them. But with the reign of Alexandru Ioan Cuza (1820-1873), who promoted a law which secularized the monasteries' goods, it became impossible for the monasteries to support those schools further more. In a statement written by bishop Melchisedec Ștefănescu, and presented within one of the sessions of the Romanian Holy Synod, he identified four reasons for the fall of the Byzantine music in Romania: 1. the lack of money to support schools, 2. the lack of money to pay the psalts, 3. the children's indifference to church, and 4. the introduction of the harmonized chants [1].

With no schools, no salary for the psalts and the new attractive Western notation, Byzantine church music seemed sentenced to die. In order not to lose it, Bishop Melchisedec proposes to transcribe the chants from Byzantine into Western notation (which by that time became the universal musical language). It is the first time that this idea of transcription occurs but it is not very appreciated by all the hierarchs, mostly because they thought that the Western notation cannot replace perfectly the Byzantine notation. On the other hand, the music professors, claimed that the Byzantine notation was too subjected to improvisation and that certain neums were interpreted differently by psalts, which made it impossible for two psalts to sing from the same musical score. It was also considered that although the melodies sung by a single psalt could be enriched with details and cadences, this type of chanting lacked the grandeur of the common chanting [2].

## **2.2. Previous Attempts of Standardization of the Religious Music**

Taking into account the difficult situation of the religious music of Byzantine tradition, and supported by Bishop Melchisedec, three professors from Iassy try to "save" (so to say) at least the spirit of the Byzantine music. Gavriil Musicescu, Grigore Gheorghiu and Gheorghe Dima, work a little over 15 years to transcribe the entire repertoire necessary for the divine service, meaning the chants of the Vespers and Matins on all eight voices and the chants of the Holy Liturgy. The three professors all had both theological and musical studies (the Seminary, the Conservatory) which meant that they knew both notations. Their work lasted that long because they used the *Anastasimatarion* of Makarios the Hieromonk, and had long hours of discussions regarding the cheironomic neums with Metropolitan Iosif Naniescu of Moldavia, a skilled composer of Byzantine music, and with Dimitrie Suceveanu, who was the psalt of the Metropolitan Cathedral from Iassy at the time. However prodigious their work was, it was rejected by the Synod. The Romanian hierarchs decided that these transcribed chants could be used for schools, but not for seminaries as the three authors intended. Although this generated a bit of a conflict at that time, the Synod's decision saved the Byzantine notation until a better solution was found.

There have been other attempts to transcribe Byzantine music, too, but none of them was serious enough to be adopted widely throughout the country. And so the Byzantine tradition went on in Romania, but since the resources were scarce (we refer to schools, books, means of publishing) it didn't continue its flourishing path from the first half of the 19th century. Now more and more composers were interested in offering harmonized creations for the divine services, because this was a rather new field and it required development. And thus, focused on creating choral chants, and choirs for the churches within the cities, people started to ignore or forget about the little parishes in the countryside. There, the religious chants were interpreted by psalts with no experience, or with no knowledge and the Byzantine chants were in danger of being transformed by the powerful influence of the folklore. More important, because the churches within the cities had choirs people were no longer able to participate to the divine service through singing. This led to the dangerous situation in which people left the Orthodox Church and moved to neo-protestants, because they were attracted there by the fact that all the participants to the services sang together.

### 3. THE PROCESS OF STANDARDIZATION

The process of standardization is the consequence of the difficult period through which the religious music of Byzantine tradition passed throughout the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It came not as a musical necessity, but mostly as a religious necessity, or as a pedagogical one. Firstly, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Justinian, noticed that people were leaving the Orthodox Church to join the protestants, and they were especially attracted to the common chanting practised by them [3]. To this respect, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decided to re-introduce the common chanting at least for the Holy Liturgy. The reason for this decision was that *"the common chanting unites and disciplines the masses, not only within the Church but everywhere it is practised. The religious chanting performed in communion is also the symbol of the chants sung by the angles around the Divine Throne"*[4].

The idea of standardization was not considered to be an innovative one, it actually meant a return to the roots of the Orthodoxy. The plan of standardization was based on the opinions of the Holy Fathers of the Church who emphasized in their works the importance of communion which is also manifested in singing. According to Saint John Chrysostom *"in the most awful mysteries themselves, the priest prays for the people and the people also pray for the priest; for the words, "with thy spirit," are nothing else than this. The offering of thanksgiving again is common: for neither doth he give thanks alone, but also all the people. For having first taken their voices, next when they assent that it is "meet and right so to do," then he begins the thanksgiving. And why marvellest thou that the people any where utter aught with the priest, when indeed even with the very Cherubim, and the powers above, they send up in common those sacred hymns? Now I have said all this in order that each one of the laity also may be wary, that we may understand that we are all one body, having such difference amongst ourselves as members with members; and may not throw the whole upon the priests but ourselves also so care for the whole Church as for a body common to us"*[5]. In fact, this is the whole point of the Holy Liturgy, to pray in common, for those who are present to the office of the Holy Eucharist must form a single body according to the pattern of the Holy Trinity: "so that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11). But this cannot be achieved when only one person, the psalt, sings during the divine service. The people's interest in participating to the Eucharist decreases because they tend to feel like spectators and not like active participants to the Holy Mystery. This leads us to the conclusion that, in time, people were more concerned with the artistic aspect of the religious chanting and not with the pedagogical one. The access to religious music became restricted for the great majority of the Orthodox and the psalts transformed it into an exclusivist type of art. The interpreters seemed not to care about the fact that *"the vocal music is the result of the direct and spontaneous expression of a certain feeling. It does not comprise or propose anything different but the immediate manifestation of that feeling"*[6]. Such an expression of feelings, of religious and pious feelings must be accessible for all those who take part in the divine service and not only to the psalt.

Thus, the decision to standardize (uniform) the religious music in Romania was taken in 1950 and immediately three music professors started to work for the standardization of the church music of Byzantine tradition. The team designated to be in charge of this important work was formed of Nicolae Lungu, professor Grigore Costea and Professor Ion Croitoru.

**Nicolae Lungu** (1900-1993) was music professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology from Bucharest. He graduated both from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and from the Conservatory of Music from Bucharest. He had a prodigious career as conductor of several choirs, of which the most important is the choir of the Romanian Patriarchate. As composer, Nicolae Lungu is considered to be one of the most important and his works are definitely amongst the most interpreted throughout the entire country. They are characterized by simplicity of the melody, rich harmony and the inspired manner in which they use the Byzantine tradition. Lungu was also a very skilled pedagogue, since he taught music for over sixty years and was the author of musical textbooks for primary and secondary school [7].

**Grigore Costea** (1888-1963) was priest and music professor. He too graduated from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology and the Conservatory of Music from Bucharest. He taught music at the Theological Seminary in Bucharest [8].

**Ion Croitoru** (1884-1972) was a graduate of the Conservatory of Music and of the Faculty of Law from Bucharest. He was a music professor and a skilled conductor and composer. His works are a sensitive and accurate icon of the way in which the Byzantine tradition can be used for choral compositions [9].

For the task given to them by the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, professors Nicolae Lungu, Grigore Costea and Ion Croitoru worked only one year to consult the most important grammars (that of Makarios the Hieromonk, the grammar of Anton Pann etc) of Byzantine music and put together a new grammar, which was published in 1951. This does not mean that their work was shallow, but it proves the urgent necessity of such an action. The choice of the theme for the first volume regarding the standardization was logic, since we cannot sing without having a theoretical basis. The most important aspect of this grammar is that it presented Byzantine music related to linear notation. The exercises and all the musical examples are presented in double notation and this is probably the most important aspect, that the access to the Byzantine melodies was no longer denied to those who didn't know the Byzantine neums. Nicolae Lungu presents the main characteristics and theoretical and technical aspects of this work in one of his articles:

a) In order to make it easier for those who would learn using this book as a textbook/guide, the team of researchers excluded the measures. It would have been too difficult to sing such songs that change their measure so often. Instead, the students were to consider the quarter note as a measurement unit.

b) Regarding the intensity of the chants, it is recommended that the students follow the melody, when it develops towards the pitch they should sing the notes more stressed and when the melody descends towards the lower register, they should interpret the melody in a softer, calmer voice.

c) It is recommended that the students start practising with shorter chants.

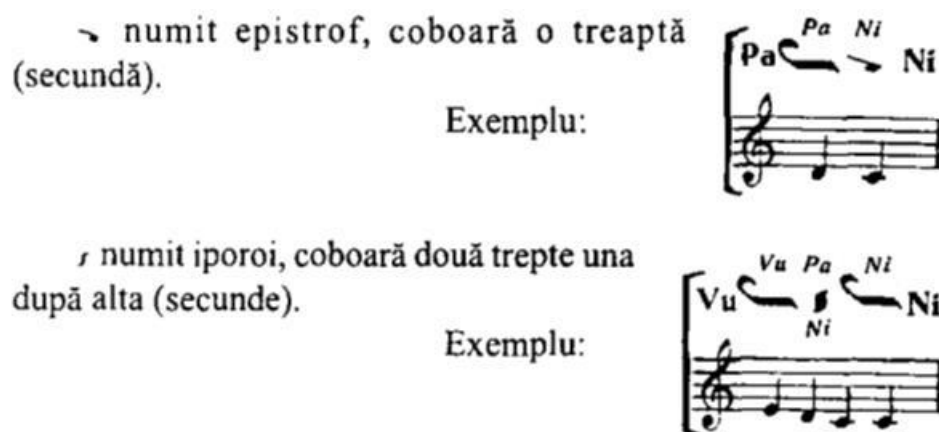
d) The quarters of tones which are thought by the authors of this grammar to be confusing even for the renowned and experienced psalts, and which ruin the beauty of the execution leading to false interpretations, have been eliminated, as they were considered useless for the theoretical purposes; the only rule accepted being that of the attraction of the sounds.

e) The old grammars begin with the 1st authentic voice, but the standardized grammar starts with the 4th plagal voice because from a pedagogical point of view, this voice, with its major scale, transmits the students the enthusiasm necessary to study this art.

f) The ample melismas have been eliminated for they were difficult to interpret and considered to be rather useless.

g) The repetition of syllables under each note/neum has been eliminated because this type of graphics determined most of the psalts to sing those notes in a stressed manner, which was highly inappropriate for this type of music [10]. For a short example of the manner in which this Grammar is presented, see **Figure 1**

This work was widely appreciated by all the music preofessors throughout the country. It has also been translated into English in 1984, *A Guide to the Music of the Eastern Orthodox Church*, translated and published by Rev. Nicholas K. Apostola, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts. Ever since it has been published, it has been used by all those who taught or wanted to learn Byzantine music in Romania, and nowadays it still is the main grammar of Byzantine music used within the Romanian Orthodox Church.



**Figure 1:** Theoretical example. N. Lungu, *Gramatica muzicii psaltice*, (© Editura Partener, Galați, 2007

After this Grammar, the team of researchers moved on to the standardization of the chants for the Holy Liturgy, for Matins and for Vespers, chants for the Holy Mysteries and hierurgies, chants for the Triodion, chants for the Pentecost, thus covering the entire range of chants needed for the divine services throughout the year. For an example regarding the final product and aspect of the chants within these books see **Figure 2**.

The impact of the standardization of religious music on the faithful has been of great importance. Only four years after the initiation of the process, in 1954, the Patriarch remarked that in certain areas of the country, the common chanting extended to a mere 75% of the parishes, and the people were glad that they could participate to the divine services [11].

There have been voices that considered the process of standardization to be the ruin of the Byzantine tradition in Romania. There still are. Indeed, from a musical point of view, this process may have altered to a certain extent the melodies. For instance we do not use quarters of tones anymore, and this is also the effect of the introduction of choral music. But, we continue to use the Byzantine notation, the structure of the voices, the principles which govern the different musical scales, all the other basic information. I do not believe that the Byzantine tradition resides in the use of quarters of tones. Besides this is also the case of all the other countries which have inherited the religious music of Byzantine tradition. History came and forced a change either deliberately through a definite process such as this one or in time, through an insensible action. On the other hand, this art cannot exist outside the church. As beautiful as it may be, it has been created with a specific purpose: to praise the Lord. When in Romania, in 1950, the Byzantine music started to drive people away from the church rather than gather them around the altars, it became useless as a feature of the Orthodoxy. The process of standardization is a compromise, and let us not forget, a very good one, in order to keep both the Byzantine tradition and the people coming to church. The theological aspect of this art is the most important. According to Christ's words, "*when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words*" (Matthew 6:7), the psaltic art must not become some pagan babbling. It must fulfill the people's need to communicate with God. We cannot be drawn into the sin of preferring the form against the meaning.

**Doamne, strigat-am**  
glasul I  Pa



**Figure 2.** N. Lungu, Doamne strigat-am (Kyrie ekekraxa), 1st voice (© EIBMBOR, Bucharest 2002)

Another important aspect that must be taken into account is that the process of standardization came right after World War Two, a time when the schools were closed, and there were a lot of illiterate people. The only opportunity for them to learn something about the Orthodox faith was through icons and through chanting. As unbelievable as it may seem, this is also the case nowadays for a few people.

Several years after the introduction of the standardized editions of the chants for the Holy Liturgy, the Patriarch remarked that the liturgical schedule of the parishes improved in 75 % of the cases, and that more and more people were coming to church, among them even those who had previously left the Orthodox Church to become protestants. Their dogmatic and moral horizon had also enriched [12].

The process of standardization of the religious music of Byzantine tradition has also opened the path for valuable choral creations, harmonizations of the Byzantine melodies which can now be used either during the religious services or within concerts on theatre stages. It has also helped more people to learn the Byzantine neums, thus being able to go to the roots of this type of religious music.

In my opinion the process of standardization has far more advantages than disadvantages. It was a necessity and it had to happen in order to keep the faith alive. Instead of blaming it we should accept it, embrace it because it helps us, the psalts achieve our goal within the church, which is to guide the people towards communion, towards the expression of the religious feeling with a single voice. We must not forget that our purpose is not only to sing, to present a musical score with a perfect interpretation. Our goal is also to convey to people, and to the priest a pious state of prayer. What good is it if we interpret perfectly from a technical point of view a complex score, with quarters of tones if we fail to get the people to the point in which they can pray inspired by our interpretation? Of course we want to know it and interpret it the best we can. It is also natural that we want to study and see how

the scales form and to be able to decode the neums and formulas of the old manuscripts, but I'm afraid that this only helps us from a technical-historical point of view, and not from a theological perspective. We must never forget that the psaltic art is a religious art and it has its definite role within the cult which we must preserve carefully.

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