

THE AESTHETIC CATEGORY OF BEAUTY IN ORTHODOX MUSIC. THE PRELIMINARY OF A RESEARCH.

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ABSTRACT

The Orthodox Church Music represents a field yet little explored in what concerns the structuring of clear aesthetic principles which can guide performers (priests, deacons, theologians, psalm readers), composers and listeners of this musical genre as to what is aesthetic and unaesthetic in this domain. This decision is entrusted almost exclusively to Liturgical theology. However, taking into consideration the obvious auspices under which this type of music exists, a clarification of certain aesthetic notions is desirable. This paper sets out to briefly discuss the aesthetic concept of "beauty" and the way in which it can be defined within the Orthodox Church Music so that the necessity of a mystical approach can be intertwined with the principles of Music Aesthetics.

KEY WORDS

The Aesthetics of Music, Sacred Music, Christian Orthodox Music Aesthetics

INTRODUCTION

Mircea Florian, in one of his writings (Florian. M. 1992) claimed that "art aspires to control all culture and therefore it contains its own view on the world". However, there are certain contexts in which this direction is more or less censored because some types of art do not function on their own but in relation to other cultural factors which tend to take control and transform art from an aim in itself into a means that serves a certain aim. The dimension of this aspect present ever since the beginning of civilisation is nowadays more noticeable due to the modern tendency to transform art into a form of social protest rather than into a form of searching the primordial harmony of things, namely that state of maximum potential of existence expressed as "beauty" and understood in direct relation with the notions of *good* and *truth*.

Even if we live in a society in which image tends to prevail over other forms of artistic existence – here we do not refer only to the conventional artistic space, since even the social media, an important element in the existence of the modern man permanently connected to technology, promotes the image as the default message carrier – music remains the art that can be equally an aim in itself and means of intensifying another existential aspect which is usually identified as an *idea* (be it religious, social, philosophical, political).

This is facilitated by the nature of music itself, by the material with which music works, namely the musical sound. Considering its existential form of wave, defined in space (a sound wave can exist here but not necessarily there, depending on the environment) but without volume – thus without physical, material form, music tends to place itself at the borderline between the physical and the spiritual, perhaps even defining the limit of the transcendent that it scrutinizes through its diaphaneity, not abandoning its physical existence altogether through the ability of the sound wave to exist physically or to be perceptible but brushing against the immaterial to a certain extent, to be understood in its fullness as a superior form of existence beyond the visible world.

Furthermore, music stands out due to its capacity, conceptually speaking, of carrying a message without having to embroider itself in a literary message. For example, more than the literary arts which force us to transpose in words what we get from the artistic message, even the fine arts are carriers of a literary message – with the exception of some contemporary abstract forms which practically imitate what music does by nature, from the beginning of its existence. A picture portraying a tree is not necessarily perceived in itself without the human mind defining not just the image of the tree which can be recognized, but also the word "tree".

Therefore, if we understand these two fundamental components of music – the *wave* that scrutinizes the transcendent and the carrier of a message that can be understood by the receptors without necessarily making use of words (i.e. objects, concepts or states that bear a name), then it is no surprise that music remains the art that par excellence can metamorphose from *aim* to a *means* of efficiently conveying *another aim* because, in this second case, it does not alter that other aim – which is conceptually defined through additional elements – but it presents it accurately, adding nothing else than a more proper way to receive it, with a more direct approach to the soul, beyond word-bound concepts, making it easier to receive that aim more thoroughly, as long as there is a will to do so.

It is no wonder then that music has been defined as the *sacred art* ever since the old days and that all religions in the history of humanity made use of music. Musical *katharsis* can exist beyond *literary* concepts - meaning that process through which all experiences are named – and this fact can lead to a serious philosophical inquiry on the cause of the *kathartic* state: the kathartic act perceived in itself or its conceptualization through interior definition with the help of words.

Positioning itself in its maximum potential above words, music is the only art that comes close to the Orthodox mystical concept of "isihia" (from the Neo-Greek *isihia*, meaning the peace that one feels when they are quiet and which cannot be expressed in words), not as a limitation due to the lack of words but as a surpassing of this state and moving to a superior one, identified as the state of the spiritual world in which the Christian Word (i.e. the Divine-Human person of Jesus Christ), through Its grace, and understood not by space but by God's **act** of approaching man, can be felt beyond words more than it can be conceptualized through words (by assigning terms) because of the simple fact that the Untouchable cannot be comprehended in words without a serious limitation.

So that is the potential of music and its uniqueness: the capacity to operate (obviously in its **non-programme** form and as long as it reaches its maximum potential in making sense) with a state of *artistic khatarsis* that is most closely related to what mysticism defines as a state of communion with the Divinity, **a state which one only feels and to which words are not necessary.**

ORTHODOX MUSIC AND ITS AESTHETIC SELF-VISION

We mentioned above that there is literally no religion in the world history that did not use music in its worship (Popescu. L., 1976) and Christianity obviously made no exception to this rule. More than that, there is biblical evidence that music was used by its Founder, Jesus Christ: the Gospel According to Matthew mentions in Chapter 26, verse 30 that Jesus together with the disciples after finishing The Last Supper “sang praises and then went out into the Mount of Olives”.

According to its own vision, Christianity is founded by Our Saviour Jesus Christ, the Lord Almighty Who comes as a man in this world and bears our humanity, sacrificing Himself for the sins of the people by dying on the Cross, resurrecting and then ascending to Heavens. Invisibly, the foundation of the Christian Church takes place in the day of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion; publicly, this foundation is sealed on the Pentecost by the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles who since then began to teach people the Christian faith. Since it is not our intent to linger on the history of Christianity or of its music, we only mention the fact that the earliest evidence related to the use of music during worships is to be found also in the Bible, in the Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter 5, verse 19 where Saint Paul urges people to: *“speak to yourselves in psalms and hymns, singing and praising the Lord in your hearts.* Therefore we understand, conventionally, that the birth of Christian Music (including the Orthodox Music) coincides with the birth of Christianity in the year 33 AD.

Being vocal par excellence, the Christian Orthodox music is formed from the Byzantine music, the local music of certain communities –as in the case of Transylvania or Banat, each of them having their own type of Church music – and, beginning with the 19th century, choral music. This remarkable characteristic lays in the fact that numerous composers and theoreticians – many of whom are saints – contributed to the development of the Orthodox Music from simple recitatives inherited from synagogues to an extremely complex and varied system which we can see being put into practice nowadays. The pursuit of solutions and aesthetic analysis has been left either in the responsibility of theologians from the field of Liturgical Theology (who have an expertise in the mystical and philosophical side of this subject, in its aim), in the few canons from the Ecumenical Synods that refer to music (which deal mostly with elements of common sense related to the vocal aesthetics of a certain hymn, with the performer’s attitude while singing) or in the decisions taken by the autocephalous synods of the contemporary Orthodox Church which aim more at aspects regarding the organization of music within the Church.

If we are to exclude from the few canons of the Orthodox Church relating to music the ones that regulate certain administrative issues of the Church or the ones that stipulate the necessity of a certain moral conduct of the hymn singers (for example

there is a canon which deters singers, as well as priests, from service if they hadn't fasted during Lent – but we will not go into that since it is not the object of our study), we are left with only two canons which go into the direction of Orthodox Church Music Aesthetics:

- **Canon 15 from the Synod in Laodiceea: "No others shall sing in the Church save only the canonical singers who go up into the ambo sing from a book" (Floca. Pr. I., 1991)**

This canon can be considered to have certain aesthetic valences due to the fact that it stipulates the access to singing hymns and psalms only to the canonical singers (authorised by the Church n.n.) for reasons which also include the necessity of having musically educated Church singers (since the approval for becoming one is given according to conduct but also to musical abilities) and this fact can be seen as a need for a proper musical act, therefore related to the aesthetic dimension of music.

- **Canon 75 of the 6th Ecumenical Synod: "We wish those who attend church for the purpose of chanting neither to employ disorderly cries and to force nature to cry aloud, nor to foist in anything that is not becoming and proper to a church; but, on the contrary, to offer such psalmodies with much attentiveness and contriteness to God, who sees directly into everything that is hidden from our sight. 'For the sons of Israel shall be reverent' (Lev. 15.30), the sacred word has taught us." (Floca. Pr. I., 1991)**

This canon is maybe the most important one since it is the only one that contains explicit aesthetical guidance; still, these indications are too general and target especially the dimension of the vocal aesthetics as a an act per se but also as an inner state necessary during the performance, without referring to some exact aesthetical standards that should be set when trying to distinguish between what is beautiful (aesthetic) or not (unaesthetic).

There are also some writings of the Church Fathers that can be taken into consideration when trying to identify the category of beauty in Church Music but this can be done only by going off at a tangent, because these writings highlight rather the mystical side of Church music (even if that is unquestionably linked to the concept of beauty in this case). We mention:

- **Saint Basil the Great (the 4th century): "When the Holy Spirit saw how hard it was to lead people to virtue and how many times they had departed from the righteous path because of their natural inclination towards sensual pleasure, what does He do? He intertwines the religious precepts with the sweetness of the melody, so that through our ears we can receive without doubt the content of the words (...) The harmonious melodies of the Psalms have then been added so that the young and not yet fully grown can truly develop spiritually while they think that they (only) sing (interpret) the songs." (Buta. Pr. I. E., 2016)**
- **The Church writer Diodor of Tars (the 4th century) said: "Singing awakens the soul with the powerful desire for that which is sung. It calms down the passions of the flesh, it drives away mean thoughts suggested by unseen enemies, it overflows in the soul only to bear good fruit; it helps the ones who fight with piety to endure**

the hardest challenges; for those who are pious it is a medicine against life's cruelties. (Buta. Pr. I. E., 2016)

Thus we can notice that in both quotations there is a certain idea relevant for this task of conceptualising beauty in the Orthodox Church Music, namely that which links beauty not only to music's quality of being an aim in itself (detailed at the beginning of the paper) but also to the spiritual efficiency of the aforementioned aim which Orthodox Church music must achieve if it wants to be part of its own vision on beauty. In the case of the Orthodox Church music beauty remains then, logically, linked to the Orthodox mystique, to its ideals; but when a musician is confronted with the necessity to offer a solution in regard to what the definition of beauty is in interpreting Orthodox Church Music, he/she may take into consideration some relevant aspects of aesthetics which we describe in the following lines.

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In its quality of science of the act of art, Aesthetics has always asked the question "What is beauty?" (Achiței. G., 1988) and has also answered that there cannot exist an exact definition of the concept of beauty, but only perspectives on it within a certain social-cultural-temporal frame. (Achiței. G., 1988)

Moreover, these perspectives have given specialisations that aim at every form of art, every artistic trend and all of their representatives, asking questions such as "What is beauty in music?, What is beauty in a given musical trend?, What is beauty in the creation of a certain composer?" so that the concept has specialised by a progressive restriction of the targeted artistic area.

Being aware of these issues of the concept of beauty and admitting to its impossibility of being defined in an absolute way due to its variety (Tatarkiewicz. W., 1981), we will try to portray a definition of beauty in the Orthodox Church Music in the following lines.

Inquiries about beauty date back to the old days of humanity and they resulted, more often than not, in a de-abstraction of the term made by replacing it with some of its properties (which are almost as abstract as the term if we are to refer to language semantics). One of the oldest replacements of this kind in order to try and define the term was made by Pythagoreans of Ancient Greece who defined aesthetic beauty related to the notion of *perfection* (Achiței. G., 1988). This notion can be understood as describing an object's most sublime form of existence, be it proper, artistic or of other nature. But this definition related to *perfection* sends us to the artistic receiver in the case of art, so it renders the way in which the work of art is perceived by a community that has exact cultural-spatial-temporal boundaries.

Without digressing into a history of the notion of beauty, we consider that is important to mark the opinion of the American philosopher George Santyana who in his work *The sense of beauty* published in 1896 defined beauty claiming that "beauty is a value, i.e. it is not a perception of the matter of fact or of a relation, it is an emotion, an affection of our volitional and appreciative nature" (apud Achiței. G., 1988). Nevertheless, in the case of religious music, emotion has to be dealt with

cautiously due to its ability not only to highlight the truth but also to deviate from the truth.

Therefore, an attempt to clearly conceptualize the notion of beauty in the Orthodox Church Music is not impossible but quite difficult because on the one hand it works with norms of the Classical Music Aesthetics and on the other hand it cannot be separated from Theology because doing so would mean ignoring its status of *aim* and *not for itself*. This approach would open the gate to musical acts within the Church that could have great aesthetic value but which would not be able to reach that aim, being only *half measures* and therefore not reaching the standard of philosophical beauty. This can be already seen in the case of other Christian cults which *allowed their Church music to be secularised*, meaning to be written exclusively by musicians). The issue of beauty in the orthodox Church music has not been dealt with directly until now and defining this aesthetical category cannot be done following a study but only through a united effort of musicologists and theologians, each contributing with their expertise to this concept which is dual by nature (theological and musical). However, the contemporary world asks this from the Orthodox Church. A greater freedom of religious expression in the predominantly Orthodox countries has led to a real boom of this genre in all its forms of manifestation. Composers who write Orthodox choral music (even though their number was small during the communist oppression, in the last decades that number has increased), specialised psalm singers (be they theologians or simply passionate about Byzantine music, for example) who now have access to an impressive amount of information on the subject with the help of the new communicational means, the editing and sharing of recordings (CDs, DVDs) in an unprecedented number in the history of the Orthodox Church music, all of these bring along enormous risks of distortion of the aim of the Orthodox Church Music if this is not clearly stated. Hence the necessity of such an approach.

CONCLUSIONS

It is not our intent to give a clear-cut definition of what beauty means in the Orthodox Church music since this type of endeavour cannot be undertaken in such a limited space and cannot be fully enunciated without complex research but in the following lines we suggest certain directions which can and – in our opinion – must be taken into consideration when someone is trying to define fundamental aesthetical notions in the Orthodox Church art.

The Greek theological thinking, i.e. the Orthodox one, is implicitly tributary to the ancient philosophy in terms of methods (but not in terms of content). Therefore we can find in it a good combination of philology and theology, which represents a starting point for our research, by calling out the famous ancient triad *good-truth-beauty*. This triad can be seen reflected in the words of Jesus Christ when talking about Himself: "I am the Way (the good, A/N), the Truth (the authentic, A/N) and the Life (as opposed to death)" (John 14:6). We can further semantically transform this opposition of terms in *good* as opposed to *bad* and furthermore *beauty* (in the sense of Divine order) as opposed to *bad* (in the sense of satanic disorder). Thus for Christians the ancient triad exists in the person of Jesus Christ. In this context, the

beauty of Christianity is Christ-centric, always leading towards Jesus. This is the foundation of the endeavour to define the Orthodox artistic-religious beauty: to direct authentically to Jesus Christ.

To direct means to deviate the attention from oneself to something else, so the Orthodox artistic beauty finds its *aim* in praising Jesus Christ and this can only be done by diminishing itself. Therefore not all works relevant for the type of beauty of the secularised musical aesthetics can be considered also part of the *sacred beauty* even when it moves the souls. Only as long as it leads to Jesus Christ does the sacred art fulfil its duty and finds at last the beauty that it has searched for through its existential restlessness.

Moreover, if beauty means mirroring Jesus in art, then His qualities become not only characteristics of His person but also constitutive elements of the aesthetics of Christian music: *"Take my yoke on you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and you shall find rest to your souls"* (Mathew 11:29). These words turn into the artistic creed of the singer and of the composer respectively. This might seem just a simple aspect of the attitude with which we are to approach the interpretative act but if we go into a deeper analysis we can notice that aesthetically and practically the terms "meek" and "lowly" have a duality which describes the very norms of the ecclesiastical music listed in the following:

- Church music is not suited for avant-garde experiments because these bring along the suspicion of wanting to impress rather than serve the aim. It is an uncomfortable reality but the lack of its explicit affirmation has brought forth many religious musical pieces that are relevant only for profane music. This illogical state is in fact the result of a lack of taking responsibility for fear of raising suspicions of retrograde attitude.
- Church music is par excellence not an eclectic environment, it does not limit only to itself but transcends towards God making it easier for the soul to get to Him. In this context the new composition quests are desirable but only as long as they take into consideration the mystical experience that has already been confirmed by the Church (including artistically), adhering to it and searching for new ways to express it. To support this claim one can think of such composers as Rachmaninoff or Tchaikovsky who succeeded to create a pure Orthodox mystical climate making use exclusively of the means of expression of the Western music. Or of the case of composer Paul Constantinescu and the way in which he finds new ways of expression of a thesaurus yet insufficiently exploited by the cult music: the Byzantine music, but keeping its spiritual climate unchanged.
- Concerning the Interpretative Act, we bring back into question the aforementioned quote of St. Basil the Great about affectivity. When man sings to God, it is natural for him to set in motion the whole inner affective universe, but this affective movement must be done with care not to be brought to the forefront as it would divert attention from the subject of the interpretative act (God) to the object of the interpretative act (man), thus emptying its primordial meaning - religious music and realizing that grotesque

oxymoron of a religious musical act that pushes Divinity into the background and drawing attention to man, creating a nonsense that transforms the subject of the artistic act in a secondary element at the expense of the object.

The composition or interpretation of Orthodox church music does not limit the human capability to create but ensures that the ratio of artistically rendered forces is the real one, hence deriving the beauty in its fullness as Truth not only literally enunciated, but also plenary in the whole artistic act . Humility (artistically manifested by the desire to find ways to expose the music of Christian music to the desire not to go out by creating something different in itself, but by looking for new ways of artificially displaying the immutable spiritual principles of Christianity) the discernment formed by accessing and affording the mystical experiences before the artistic act to which its subject (the composer or the interpreter) adheres to the soul, the gentleness, as the opposite sense not only to the aggression but also to the ridicule of any kind (artistic avant-gardism of a certain nature is identified with aggression) as well as a deeper meditation on them, can be a good start in the philosophical enactment of the beautiful Orthodox church music so that later it can be delimited and pragmatically in some compositional directives not only to limit but to guard against the emptying of its sense of the Orthodox musical act.

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