

## **Romanian composers from the second half of the 20th century - the beginning of the 21st century, who composed works with religious themes (solo repertoire for soprano voice, vocal-symphonic repertoire and choral repertoire)**

Maria CATRINA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *The idea of Christian spirituality in the Romanian music can be placed on the same level as the idea of prayer. In her book Mariana Popescu claims about the choral poem Our Father composed by Irina Odăgescu-Ţuţiuianu that it ‘appeared as a great need for prayer.’*

*This personal need for prayer transpires from the creations of the Romanian composers in the second half of the 20th century – the beginning of the 21st century as a form of sacrifice, of praise or of thanks to the saints, to the Savior Jesus Christ and His Mother, and these works dedicated to Jesus Christ and to Virgin Mary being from the most famous and numerous in this category of sacred music.*

*From the category of these religious-based works there are also the lieder for soprano voice accompanied by piano or chamber ensemble that were composed by: Felicia Donceanu, Carmen Petra-Basacopol, Liana Alexandra, Şerban Nichifor, Nicolae Coman, Roxana Pepelea or Theodor Grigoriu.*

*As for the religious vocal-symphonic works I mention the following composers: Ana Szilágyi, Livia Teodorescu-Ciocănea, Felicia Donceanu, Myriam Marbe, Marian Mitea, Viorel Munteanu and others.*

*As for the choral creation, in the same area of religious inspiration there are also the carols composed and harmonised by Iosif Fiţ, Constantin Catrina, Viorel Munteanu.*

**Keywords:** *Romanian composers, soprano voice repertoire, vocal-symphonic repertoire, choral music*

---

<sup>1</sup> Transilvania University of Braşov, mpetcu2002@yahoo.com

## 1. Introduction

The idea of Christian spirituality in the Romanian music can be placed on the same level as the idea of prayer. In her book Mariana Popescu claims about the choral poem *Our Father* composed by Irina Odăgescu-Țuțuianu that it “*appeared as a great need for prayer*” (Popescu 2012, 97.) This personal need for prayer transpires from the creations of the Romanian composers as a form of sacrifice, of praise or of thanks to the saints, to the Savior Jesus Christ and His Mother, and these works dedicated to Jesus Christ and to Virgin Mary being from the most famous and numerous in this category of sacred music.

From the category of these religious-based works there are also the lieder for soprano voice accompanied by piano or chamber ensemble, vocal-symphonic and choral works.

## 2. Discussion

From among the composers *constantly concerned with the sacred dimension* there are also Corneliu Cezar and Octavian Nemescu: “*Cezar’s, and Nemescu’s ideal, too, was to transform the human sound into the most perfect icon of the divine, cosmic sound, thus the instrumental and vocal vibration to be filled with vital, divine and cosmic energy*” (Sandu-Dediu 2002, 89).

‘In fact, in the early 1990s, Nemescu defined the two genres in which sacred music could be approached: either the vocal liturgy, based on sounds as liturgical image creators, necessary for invocation, or the music dedicated to the Temple, a liturgical sonorous deed, so sound creations for certain moments of the year, the day, hours or places, in order to emphasize the sacred importance of time and place through concentration and prayer, the daily and derisory sonority being rejected, blocked. (...) However, the definition of these two options can be broadened by many other ways of writing sacred music, as, for example, Stefan Niculescu does.’

In certain vocal works dedicated to Virgin Mary such as *Ave Maria* by Șerban Nichifor or *Salve Regina* by Felicia Donceanu, I have found a distinctive element that emphasizes the importance of the person the work is dedicated to, the mention of the composers on the score ‘to my mother’. This little clue, but of great and profound significance, can also be interpreted as an act of entrusting the earthly mother to the eternal care of the Mother of Jesus - Virgin Mary.

Felicia Donceanu also composed *Prayer* for soprano, piano and hammer on the verses of the poetry *Prayer* (dedicated to the Mother of God) by Mihai

Eminescu, *Stabat Mater* for voice and harp /piano, then another *Prayer to Saint Mary* for soprano and chamber ensemble (clarinet, violin, cello and piano), similarly, *Prayer to our Lord - Our Father*, for soprano, piano, Campanile, cello and hammer, and the dramatic poem *Invocatio* for soprano and chamber orchestra, where he used religious texts and fragments from Ovid's writings.

Similarly, Liana Alexandra wrote a beautiful *Poem for Madonna from Neamț*, alongside with *Poem for Romania*, for soprano and piano, both on the lyrics of the Belgian poet Eugene van Itterbeek.

Virgin Mary is also dedicated *the Prayer* for soprano and piano on the lyrics of the poems with the same name by Mihai Eminescu, the composition being signed by the composer Nicolae Coman.

The musical creation dedicated to Virgin Mary the Byzantine Hymn for Virgin Mary, op.125, for soprano, violin, cello and piano is also added, on a liturgical text by Doru Popovici, and Livia Teodorescu- Ciocănea wrote - The Annunciation, - Cantata for soloists (bass and soprano), 4 horns, strings.

Another composer acknowledged in this area of sacred creation is Carmen Petra-Basacopol. Thus, in many of her piano accompaniment creations, she found as a source of inspiration the texts of Psalms in the Psalter of the Emperor and Prophet David, a book that is considered 'the crown of ancient Testament poetry.' (Anania 1998, 7). From among her most representative creations on texts in David's Psalms there is also the Five Lied Cycle 'Of the Psalms of David,' op. 84 (2000), for voice and piano.

At the end of the introductory chapter to Psalter's commentary, the author Bartholomeu Valeriu Anania highlights the major attributes of the poems in David's Psalms: "As long as the poetry becomes prayer, it breaks away from the ritual patterns, the time, and the due times, and it wastes in a perpetual burning-out, as a suave and strong sacrifice:"

*My heart is ready, my God,  
my heart is ready;  
in my glory I will sing and praise you.  
Wake up, you, my glory,  
wake up, you, psaltery and harp!;  
at dawn I will wake up.*

*"Thus, sorrow, anguish, nostalgia, longing, pain, suffering, doubt, despondency, interrogation, imputation, revolt, humiliation, tear, repentance, prayer, begging, crying, hope, welcoming, rejoicing, joy, jubilation, ecstasy (...), there are so many steps in the emotional universe of the psalms, which, besides their poetic beauty,*

*explains why they penetrated so deeply into the soul of human beings.”* (Anania 1998, 23)

Thus, Carmen Petra-Basacopol has in her sacred creation from the lieds for voice and piano: *Prayer* for soprano /bass on lyrics by Mihai Eminescu, *Evening Service during Passion Week* and *Spiritual* in the cycle “Confessions”, op.104, on lyrics by Tudor Arghezi, then the cycle ‘The angel screamed’, op.96, on sacred lyrics, the cycle ‘Byzantine-style Songs’, op.130, on psalter lyrics, Kyrie Eleison, op.122, on lyrics by Paul Verlaine, Maramureş Praise , op.93, on lyrics by Ioan Alexandru, then ‘Acatist Files’, op.68, for voice and flute, a song dedicated to St. John, the Walt, on lyrics by his holiness Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, to choral creations – the cycle ‘Sacred hymns’, op.112, for male choir, the cycle ‘Sacred Songs’, Op.90, (2001), with texts from David’s psalms, for mixed a cappella choir and other works.

In the same area of creation, of the small dimension works there is also *Letter to birds* - of Saint Francis of Assisi, for voice and piano by Theodor Grigoriu. It is worth mentioning the text of this work for its beauty:

*‘My sisters, the birds,  
God helps you,  
‘cause you do not sow or reap.  
He gives you:  
Springs and rivers,  
to drink from them when you are thirsty;  
hills and mountains  
and tall trees,  
to make your own nests.  
And because you do not know how to turn and sew,  
He gives you:  
warm and colored clothes  
for you and your chickens.  
The Creator loves you dearly  
if He gives you so many gifts  
That’s why, my dear sisters,  
celebrate and praise  
the Lord. ‘*

Here is the mention of the composer Teodor Grigoriu, from under these lyrics: *‘This text of great beauty was communicated to me by my friend, the writer Constantin Ţoiu, who, being in Paris, copied it from the notice board at the church Saint Germain des Prés. When coming the next day, checking whether he had copied it*

*correctly, the text disappeared. Asking a cleric where it was, he replied that the texts change every day, each saint being mentioned on his birthday, once a year. Let us thank God and Saint Francis of Assisi for this meeting with a divine poetic light'. (Grigoriu 2016, 9)*

The Oratory *Lebendiges Wasser* (the living water) composed between 2012-2013 by Ana Szilágyi, a composer in Braşov, is written for soprano (the Samaritan woman), baritone (Jesus Christ), reciter (the Evangelist) and orchestral ensemble composed of: flute, English horn, violin, cello, harp, percussion (tympanum, small drum, suspended cinnabar and marimba), as well as electronic music. The Libretto uses passages from the Holy Scripture and it is transposed for this work by Petter Rettinger (John 4, verses 1-30 and 39-42). The absolute premiere took place in October 18<sup>th</sup> 2014 at St. Leopold Church in Vienna.

The Oratory *Lebendiges Wasser* (the living water) is a vocal-symphonic work with a New Testament inspired religious subject. To create an archaic atmosphere, the composer used a modal language and she equally introduced musical instruments used in ancient cultures, such as the harp, flute or horn. At the same time, the author of music used the electronic environment to give a touch of the present. Also, an important role in the performance of the musical discourse is played by the reciter (the Evangelist) – at the level of speech - that is used instead of the recitative discourse. Thus, by combining these elements of modal musical language, by using old instruments, electronic music as well as spoken parts, she combines the old and the new.

From the point of view of the form, the oratory is structured in two parts of four scenes, which include the three media: the music, the speech and the electronic environment. The three media are heard separately or concurrently. In these two parts, the whole picture of the two biblical figures, Jesus Christ and the Samaritan woman, is set up. These two parts are: Part I: 1. Give me to drink! 2. The living water; 3. Are you greater than Jacob? 4. The fountain; respectively, Part II which is composed of four scenes: 1. Go call your husband! 2. Our ancestors; 3. Worship the Father in Spirit and Truth; 4. Messiah

In the same area of sacred creation this time for big-size works there are *the Requiem - the Parastas* - for soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor, bass, chorus and orchestra by Marţian Negrea, and Myriam Marbe composed the works *Stabat Mater* for 12 soloist voices and the ensemble (1991) and the *Choir Requiem*, solo voice, instrumental ensemble (1990). 'The subtitle of the *Requiem*, 'Fra Angelico-Marc Chagall-Voronetţ', shows from the very beginning the super-confessional significance of the work, M.Marbe using here multiple funeral references: words from the requiem Latin mesa of recitation, the Romanian dirge, a passage from kaddisch, a Byzantine hymn of the Resurrection.' (Sandu-Dediu 2002, 83)

Marian Mitea composed a work dedicated to Virgin Mary - *Stabat Mater* (to my mother's memory), for soloists, choir and orchestra, and a Requiem for soloists, choir and orchestra (2006).

The religious inspired choral creation of the Romanian composers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century is brilliantly represented by Corneliu Cezar by the Choral Suite - *Flames and Wheels* (1977). Similarly, Octavian Nemescu composed *Salve Regina* for mixed choir and organ.

From among the important representatives of the sacred choral Romanian creation there is also Ștefan Niculescu, about whom Valentina Sandu-Dediu stated: 'Thus, the major concern of the composer will be directed to the musical expression of the sacred, of his own faith.' (Sandu-Dediu 2002, 82) In *Invocatio* for 12 voices, 'the composer uses a distorted religious text, so as not to be easily understood in the political conditions of the time, a 'prayer of the heart' that could be repeated every day of the week. It is evident the inspiration from the hesychasm, his closeness to the mystical theology of the Orthodoxy. (Sandu-Dediu 2002, 82) In the same choral category, Ștefan Niculescu also wrote *Axion* for women's choir and saxophone (1992) or Psalmus for Six Voices (1993).

Contemporary Romanian composers include also Viorel Munteanu who wrote the poem Voices of Putna (1980) for string orchestra and men choir and Christmas Suite I for mixed choir and orchestra (1991).

From Viorel Munteanu' Christmas Suites I leap to the rich carol creation in our country. These are based on religious inspired texts that recall moments related to the birth and life of the Savior Jesus Christ, of the life of the Mother of God, or of some saints such as St. Joseph, St. John the Baptist, or St. Paraschiva known as St. Friday (Sfânta Vineri) in the popular consciousness.

In this context, it is worth mentioning the fruitful creation from the volume of Ioșif Fiț 'Carols, Carols ...' (2011) which 'sums up to 136 titles, out of which 111 carols for 4 voices mixed choir, 18 of them being harmonized and in other variants, and 7 icons and images referring to the Nativity.' (Fiț 2012) Among these carols made on religious-inspired texts, there are also about 20 carols with profane inspiration. Among the themes identified in this volume are those related to Christmas and the Nativity, covering the whole area of these choral creations, and towards the end of the volume there are some carols with themes related to the Baptism of the Lord - *The Lyrics of the Baptism - The Epiphany*, Palm Sunday Carol - *The Palm Sunday's Lyrics*, Easter Carol - *The Resurrection Lyrics*, or *The Pentecostal Pain - The Pentecostal Lyrics*.

Equally, in *Afterword to the portrait of a musician: Ioșif Fiț*, the author Constantin Catrina refers to the volume 'Carols, carols ...' as being: 'a large suite of miniature jewels whose ancient melodic-rhythmic and poetic twisting seems to us

at this time an inspired and adequate processing and choral harmonization: a succession of rhythmic formulas of iamb, troche, pyre, dactil, anapest; a solemn coloring, a special creation marked by the dynamics of the chorus, the alternation of voices, by some imitations and onomatopoeic effects, such as: the hum of the Bucharest/ buhay, the clanging of the bells, etc.

By analyzing the contents of the carols reunited in this volume under the signature of Iosif Fiț, one can notice the composer's express option about the religious content carols.' (Fiț 2012, 290)

Researcher and connoisseur of the Byzantine and religious music, Constantin Catrina Lyrics of repentance (2003) for soprano, alto, and a group of men, with texts from David's Psalms: 120, 24, 32 and 3 (in the order of the text). He also wrote Two Byzantine Verses (1991), for mixed choir, hammer and bells. This work is special by the invitation to prayer and by the atmosphere that is created for prayer, by the hammer and by the sonority of the bells. These two elements - the hammer and the bells - are known in the Orthodox liturgical practice, the first announcing the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, and the bells highlight certain important moments in the conduct of the religious service. Thus, the composer Constantin Catrina manages to emphasize the importance of the moment by introducing these percussion elements in addition to the choral ensemble.

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, I mention that I have given only some examples of vocal creations of the Romanian composers from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century - beginning of the 21<sup>th</sup> century, from the chamber ones to the vocal-symphonic and choral ones, all of them having as a common denominator the religious inspired text. And, it is not by accident that I gave the floor to the choral creation, which is highly vast in our country, but just to say with prof. Mariana Popescu about the choral song that it is 'the most suitable way of expressing the feelings of the human soul.' (Catrina 2013, 8)

### References

Bartolomeu, Valeriu Anania. 1998. *Cartea Psalmilor sau Psaltirea Profetului și Regele David [The Book of Psalms or the Psalter of the Prophet and King David]*. Cluj: Arhidiecezana Cluj Printing House.

- 
- Catrina, Constantin. 2013. *10 Miniaturi Corale [10 Choral Miniatures]*. Braşov: Mecatrin Printing House;
- Fiţ, Iosif. 2012. *Colinde-colinde ... [“Carols-carols...”]*. Sibiu: Oastea Domnului Printing House.
- Grigoriu, Theodor. 2016. *Scrisoare către păsări – de Sfântul Francisc din Assisi. [Letter to birds– by Saint Francis of Assisi]*. Bucharest: Musical Printing House.
- Popescu, Mariana. 2012. *Irina Odăgescu-Ţuţuianu – O viaţă dedicată muzicii [A Life Dedicated to Music]*. Bucharest: Musical Printing House.
- Sandu-Dediu, Valentina. 2002. *Muzica Românească între 1944-2000 [The Romanian Music between 1944-2000]*. Bucharest: Musical Printing House.