

Elements of modal composition in Alexandru Pascanu's Choral *Festum Hibernum*

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Abstract: *In the second half of the 20th century, a new name as brought to general attention of the Romanian musical world, regarding the composition (but not solely) of instrumental and of choral music especially: Alexandru Pascanu. This paper is an analysis of Alexandru Pascanu's choral poem "Festum hibernum" from the perspective of the modal composition: melodic modal (the diversity of the natural or chromatic modals, of the Pentatonic or pre-Pentatonic scales, or outside the Octatonic scales), harmonic modal (chords analysis, other than the traditional ones: major, minor, diminished or augmented), and polyphony (specific elements: counterpoint, imitation, cannon, inverted intervals, bi and poly-modals).*

Keywords: *modal, Paşcanu, carol, melody, harmony, polyphony*

1. Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, a new name came to the general attention in the field of musical pedagogy and composition of instrumental music, especially in coral composition: Alexandru Paşcanu, very talented Romanian musician, known for his *Tratat de armonie (On Harmony)*. Among the coryphaei of the Romanian music, carrying the great musical inheritance of his predecessors (to name but a few, George Enescu, Paul Constantinescu, Mihail Jora, Teodor Rogalski, Constantin Silvestri, Sabin Drăgoi), Alexandru Pascanu shone for a few decades on the firmament of the Romanian music both as a composer and as a pedagogue, imposing his unique, distinct style which craftily combines impressionist harmony with different intervals, parrallelisms and hexatonal chords derived from the Romanian folklore (Popovici 1966, 222).

Although he did not compose much, he was a prolific composer who searched for contemporary solutions, specific to the autochthonous modalism, using harmonic proceedings in order to adapt the impressionist methods to the soil of Romanian music (Cosma 2004, 293).

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The present paper aims to make an analysis of Alexandru Pascanu's poem for mix choir, accompanied by percussion (jingle stick bells, whipcrack and cymbals), "Festum hibernum", subtitled *Old Cyclic Traditions*. It was dedicated to the renown Madrigal Choir and to its conductor, Marin Constantin.

This analysis takes into account the various modal elements: melodic, harmonic and polyphonic. The melodic modal analysis is focused on the diversity of the natural or chromatic modals, with or without mobile intervals, of some scales which surpass the Octatonic scales, of modal scales changes and modulation on short intervals, and so on. The analysis of the harmonic modals is centered on the non-traditional chords (major, minor, augmented, diminished), and, for the modal polyphony, on the specific elements: counterpoint, imitation, cannon, inverted intervals, bi and poly-modals.

2. Modal Harmony in the Choral Poem *Festum hibernum*

In his poem "Festum hibernum", the composer makes an attempt to re-create the extraordinary and magical world of the winter holydays, using as a source of inspiration the ancestral tunes of folk and religious carols, dance songs that are specific to this old tradition.

Taking as a starting point the Romanian carols, the composer wrote a musical piece, a mix of the most popular songs of this time of the year, each having its own, well-established tempo (a carol taken from the German tradition, which is frequently sang for Christmas, is also included here, "O, Christmas Tree").

Divided into sixteen micro-sections, which are not separated, but create a natural flow, a continuous unit, the choral poem "Festum hibernum" begins with a superposition of distinct plans, where, while in the first plan the theme of the carol "O, ce veste minunată" is exposed, in the second plan, the sound material aims to synthesize the chromatic material by vertical sum of distinct voices of diatonic profile (poli-diatonal). (Duțică 2017, 24)

The carols do not follow a similar pattern, considering their occurrence in the poem: "O, ce veste minunată" occurs four times, twice "Trei crai de la rășărit", "Pe cerul cu flori frumoase", "Trei păstori", "Sorcova" and once "Bună dimineața la Moș Ajun", "Am plecat să colindăm", "O, brad frumos".

Following a few introductory measures, where the percussion instruments enter, one by one, onto the stage, superposing vocal glissandos over semi-determined sounds (Tenor, Bass), the theme of the first carol, "O, ce veste minunată" appears for Soprano 1, and over this are superposed Soprano 2, 3 and 4 and Alto 1 and 2, and a series of rhythmic-melodic formulas connoted as *pepetuum mobile* (thrills of quavers and embroideries of semiquavers where the descending chromatics is also present (Rîpă 2001, 232) in second measure, at S3) and various melodic pedals (Fig. 1, measures 10-12).

Fig.1. Pașcanu 1980, measures 10-12)

The result is a melodic *mélange* having dissonant vertical structures, where the inner pulse is given by the dynamic of the rhythmic-melodic structures mentioned above, with many modal centers (poli-modals).

The following couplet, written in Adagio, introduces the listener to the stretto superposition of two different phrases, exposing carol tunes, one in completely parallel quarto, resulting in two modal centers: Soprano – A aeolian, Alto – E aeolian, Tenor 1 – A aeolian, Tenor 2 – E tetra-tonic (E – G – A – B), Bass – pedal on A, thus constituting a pertinent example of modal composition (Fig. 2, measures 18 - 26)

In agreement with Luminița Duțică, we see the third section as a preponderantly harmonic transition, based on a descending sequential evolution. (Duțică, 2017, 27)

Fig. 2. *Pașcanu 1980, Measures 18-26*

From the melodic modal perspective, the modal scale used here is sometimes, equivocal. The carol motif below could be interpreted as an acoustic 1 (Lydian - Mixolydian) on F, having the beat on the second pitch, but also as istrian (Aeolian with diminished quinta), with a beat on the fifth pitch (Fig. 3, measures 35 – 42).

Fig.3. *Pașcanu 1980, Measures 35-42*

The composition. The paper is abundant in *tri-son*, tetra chords, other parallel vertical structures, bi or poly-modal overlapping, simple or complex pedals, a melodic *tri-son* semi-defined as height (in glissando), also having the role of a pedal. In section 7, Adagio, quarter 54, the theme of the carol „Trei Păstori” is presented in parallel tetra chords sustained by a pedal on A at the tenor, followed by third tetrachords, also parallel, resulting in an authentic simultaneous divergent polimodal (Figure 4, measures 75- 82).

The image shows a musical score for three voices: Soprano (S), Alto (A), and Tenor (T). The music is written in 3/4 time. The Soprano part (S) begins with a complex melodic line in the first measure, followed by a series of parallel tetra chords. The Alto part (A) starts with a similar melodic line, also featuring parallel tetra chords. The Tenor part (T) is characterized by a sustained pedal point on the note A, which supports the harmonic structures above it. The score consists of eight measures, with a change in time signature from 3/4 to 3/4 (indicated by a 3/4 symbol) at the beginning of the second measure.

Fig. 4. Pașcanu 1980, Measures 75-82

In section 11, Vivace scherzando, quarter = 160, the composer creates contrast by putting in the first plan, with the feminine voices, “Sorcovă”, in a extremely varied chord. Thus, within a span of only seven measures, there are *trison*, seventh chords in different inversions, tetra chords with or without modified sounds, other modal structures enchainned in harmonic relations which modify their modal centre extremely quick, all in a continuous crescendo, imposed by the very high composition (Soprano —in B flat).

Fig.5. *Pașcanu 1980, Measures 118-121*

The composer's nostalgia for the chromatic harmony of a tonal- functional structure can be noticed in section 12, tempo *Largo nostalgico e rubato*, quarter = 44, where in the main part is given to the carol "O brad frumos", supported by a harmony where tri-sons and diminished heptachords, sometimes in a relation of direct succession are predominant (Dutica 2017, 42).

The carols are reshaped in this composition, sometimes there are mere fragments, sometimes they suffer rhythmic and melodic variations or even thematic adaptations, which sometimes appear superposed or *in stretto* (Figures 6 and 7).

In the example above, there can be seen thematic insertions from "Trei pastori", "Pe cerul cu flori frumoase", and "Bună dimineața", which sustain and complete in a crescendo the tune of the caril „O, ce veste minunată!”.



Fig. 6. Pașcanu 1980, Measures 204-208



Fig. 7. Pașcanu 1980, Measures 213-216

Sometimes, precise height of sound is replaced with undetermined or partially determined heights, usually by *glissando* and other techniques of vocal emission (whispering, Onomatopoeia, alliterations between *ff* and *pp* or the reverse, in very short time intervals).

As the composer used to do in other of his works, the text is here entirely Onomatopoeic, of a great complexity. Thus, and adding the special chromatic added by the percussion instruments, such as jingle stick bells, whipcrack and cymbals at the

beginning and the end of the play, confer the composition an extremely variety and complexity in the rich context of Romanian Chorals of the end of the 20th century.

3. Conclusions

Alexandru Pașcanu is, by excellence, a harmony man, his harmonic writing taking first place in front of his polyphonic writings (which is also present in his choirs). His choral, “Festum hibernum”, constitutes a referential point in the Romanian choir literature, having as a distinct feature of harmonic musical language the frequent use of parallel chords, especially major or minor trison in descending relation. Bu-chords of quarto or completely parallel quart chords are frequent (the quartos are never augmented or diminished in these chords).

Last, but not least, we should mention the multitude of chords, others than the traditional ones, from which most are added seconds chords. These, together with the seventh or natural none (Terenyi 2001, 17) – final chords – confer to the composition an impressionist flavour.

Taking into account the modal melodic writing, the composer uses the entire gamut of the natural modes and of some chromatic modes. It must be mentioned here the frequency of the mobile plans, and as a stylistic particularity, taking into account both the melodic and the harmonic – polyphonic one, the high frequency of the pedal points.

4. References

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