

## The Sacred and Profane in western Christian music

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**Abstract:** *The terms SACRED and PROFANE, referring to an immense and valuable path in the history of music, are rendered in this paper as defining essential aspects of the art of sound, mainly of the choral one. In order to differentiate the sacred (Christian) music with a religious (Biblical) text and the music without religious content (love, nature, war, or mythology), we will use in turn this sensitive terminology for language diversification purposes. Musicology clearly differentiates in the opuses of composers between the sacred and profane creation.*

Key-words: *chorus, profane, sacred, expressivity, semantics.*

### 1. Introduction

The sacred (*sacred*– lat. *sacer*, meaning *saint, pure, perfect, unattainable*, divine attribute) and profane in Western Christian music – The influence of the laity in Neo-protestant Evangelical Christian music represents the result of a pursuit of over 25 years of a controversial, challenging subject matter, many times abandoned because of its subjective, sensitive implications. Being raised in the Adventist Church in a commune in Cluj County, I have been in touch with church music since I was little, my father being a choir conductor in Frata community. The choir's repertoire was strongly influenced by extant collections, generally coming from the North American space, where the Adventist religion originates from. The choir was an important part of the religious service; thus rehearsals would take place several times during the week, especially during the communist period.

The words *profane, lay, mundane, and secular* are considered to be synonyms in terms of music. Of course, they also have other meanings, some even

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negative ones (e.g. to profane, to defile, blasphemy, sacrilege etc.). In order to differentiate sacred (Christian) music with a religious (Biblical) content and the music without religious content (love, nature, war or mythology), we will use these adjectives in turns for language diversification purposes. Musicology clearly differentiates in the opuses of composers between the sacred and profane creation. Also, for a wider variety of vocabulary, we will consider sacred music and religious music as synonyms. The etymology of the word 'profane' comes from the Latin *pro-fanum*, that is before (outside) the temple or sanctuary.

## 2. The Sacred and Profane in universal music

Countryside choirs would have a good musical level, due to regular rehearsals, but also to the promotion of music within children's shows, who were familiar with the harmonies and specific melodic line of Neo-protestant music. In churches in rural areas, the repertoire was an easy one, accessible both to interpreters and the audience. The repertoire of the choir would comprise works by American composers, with challenging imitations especially between feminine and masculine voices, the discourse being rendered strongly rhythmic through fragmentation techniques of the text or by passing the theme to deep voices with a vocal rhythmic accompaniment of high voices.

The concerns for sound emission and cultivating a musical taste were less, because of lack of education and thorough training of musicians. Conductors and organists would not have, in general, musical training, being talented self-taught, but musically limited. In Adventist communities in town the situation used to differ, because conductors were musically trained, and common members could easily take part in cultural activities (vocal-symphonic concerts, training courses etc.) organised in their town.

In the repertoire of Adventist choirs in important towns works from the great sacred music were found: motets by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (ca. 1525-1594), harmonised chorales by Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) and J. S. Bach (1685-1750), choirs and even arias and recitatives from The Messiah oratorio by G. F. Händel (1685-1759). In certain communities, French repertoire was preferred, with works by composers Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) or Charles Gounod (1818-1893). Byzantine music composers were avoided, because an association of any type with Orthodox theology was not wanted, and the Eastern sonorities of Byzantine tones were very seldom listened to in Neo-protestant churches. Gavriil Musicescu (1847-1903) was

the favourite composer of Eastern church music, especially part II (*O Lord, open thou my lips*) in the Choir Concert no 1, for drawing close to tonal music in his choral works, especially in that mentioned before. An important aspect that a conductor should take into account when picking a choir's repertoire is the natural acoustics of the space where they would interpret the choral works.

Also, composers wrote these works depending on the space meant for the interpretation of these works. Catholic churches have natural acoustics that favour maintaining long sounds, melismatic, vaulted, typical for Renaissance phrases, of dense and dissonant harmonies, and of a cappella music in general. The organ, an instrument almost always presents in Catholic churches (some becoming subsequent to the Reformation, Lutheran churches) is a supplementary support to voices in vocal works with an accompaniment.

Neo-protestant cults, for various reasons, do not use Gothic architecture of Catholic churches or the Byzantine one of Orthodox churches. Huge costs for erecting these types of architectonic buildings, but also the concept of modesty and simplicity promoted by Neo-protestants will greatly affect acoustics, so that implicitly the repertoire of choirs will be conditioned by these church spaces. Catholic Gothic churches were considered too cold, especially with regard to the theology of the relationship between God and man, a transcendental relationship that in Neo-protestants acquires a different meaning. God is not regarded with fear anymore, but He is rather seen as a close friend, and the relationships between the members of Neo-protestant cults become almost family like. This new type of relationship between man and God leads to the charismatic movement in the Neo-protestant space. Music is strongly influenced by all these aspects, thus the lack of natural acoustics will be supplemented by the technology of sound engineering, of microphones, of speakers, of artificial crescendos performed by buttons, of an increasing presence of backing tracks as an accompaniment, of applications with a role of sound correction, some even in real time; phenomena appreciated by a large part of members, especially the young ones, but not accepted by a conservative side.

We cannot stand against technological progress, but we have to note that all these digital means have had a considerable impact on the sound quality. We state boldly but also authoritatively that this impact was a mainly negative one. Artificial intelligence has not yet come to compare itself with the creative force of human interpretation, which is sometimes spontaneous, different in terms of acoustics, influenced by the mood of the interpreter, the artistic act being a unique, unrepeatable act. The accompaniment in the form of a backing track, on the other side, has an invariable tempo, which is identical every time, and the technical

problems related to microphony can affect the rhetorical discourse of the interpreter. The digital musical instruments more and more present in the Neo-protestant church space will contribute to a gradual quitting of the beauty of natural resonances.

The Romanian conductor Sergiu Celibidache (1912-1996) would speak about the multitude of information existing in a natural sound, which, through its digitalisation, will lose its characteristic features. Thus, he would mention that a recording is a fake experience of what happened in real time. The richness of the natural acoustic information, together with the spiritual experience at a concert, will not be able to be rendered digitally. Of course, many years have passed since the recording of that interview, in the meantime technology has progressed, microphones capture more and more information, but sound manipulation is present more than ever, both in the music industry and in the Neo-protestant church area. The lack of vocal qualities, of sound accuracy, of intense rehearsals, is more and more made up for by the work after the recording, the reality of the end 'product' being much embellished. The software for pitch correction, digital takeover of the echo in a certain famous church, the artificial addition of a vibrato of a certain interpreter, the equalising of the ratio between voice intensities, of harmonic balance or digital homogenisation will produce artificial music, deprived of life. The 'live' experience is an essential element in musical art, especially within religious services. Emotions and authentic spiritual feelings are tightly related to natural elements, the rhetorical effect being much diminished in the case of an exaggerated use of digital devices.

The discovery of the *Sacred Music* collection, published during the communist regime, whose purpose was to promote musical values of recognised composers and the taste for the 'great music' determined my choice to study at the Academy of Music 'Gheorghe Dima' in Cluj-Napoca, the department for Conducting an Academic Choir, in the class of professor and conductor Florentin Mihăescu. In the repertoire of the Sacred Music collection, there generally occurred composers from the area of German Protestantism, but also before the Lutheran Reformation, composers of the great Byzantine music, the repertoire being completed by works of coeval Adventist Romanian composers. In the section dedicated to this impressive collection, we will provide further details. In order to protect the persons involved in typewriting this anthology, on the title page, little information is found about the year of publication or collaborators, because during the communist regime the reproduction of materials with religious content was forbidden, especially in the churches considered on the brink of lawfulness, such as Neo-protestants.

As a choir conductor within the worship services in the Adventist Church, I always promoted a valuable repertoire, carefully selected, varied from a stylistic point of view, a repertoire which in the secular context of contemporary period, is less and less tasted. The trend of the so-called contemporary Christian music (CCM) becomes more and more popular by using an accessible, superficial musical literary language, most times wrapped in an amateurish way. Thus, two worlds in a continuous conflict appear, generally the young, rebellious generation versus the older, more conservative one. The second category has adapted with difficulty to rampant changes, both theological and musical, over the last decades, especially in the Neo-protestant space. Genres that were before considered as dedicated exclusively to profane music are found within religious services, the general atmosphere being one specific to a concert, and less to worship. The relativisation of concepts and principles that were once unshakeable dilute more and more the form of worship within Neo-protestant churches, in the context in which historical churches still preserve their traditions almost unspoiled after centuries of existence.

A perspective on the pre-Christian sacred Jewish music, as well as its evolution and interference with the lay world up to the first Christians, and then until today, start with a journey in the Biblical history, using canonical books with an interest for the manifestation through music of the first people mentioned in the Old Testament, and then passing to the important musical events of the New Testament. The Bible is a controversial source from a historical point of view, thus we analyse the principles mentioned by scholar theorists and historians about the differences between mundane and religious music.

We follow the long journey of sacred music before the Great Schism in 1054, but especially papal reforms after the separation between the Eastern and Western churches. These periodical reforms aimed at reorganising liturgical services where worship music was an important part of this church rite, always adapting to the new circumstances of social and cultural development from various historical periods. Papal letters contained specific information about the instrumentation to be used within religious services, the melodic line, the manner of interpretation of music, the harmony, the constant concern being the complete separation of the laity and church world. Papal councils will have major effects in developing Western sacred music by founding specialised schools, cultural institutions from which exceptional choral and instrumental groups will result. They will aspire to an ideal of musical purity, such as the Gregorian chant, which for centuries inspired generations of composers who enriched the universal repertoire with choral or instrumental jewels.

Recognised composers of sacred music highlighted the text by using rhetorical elements or symbols (which are essential elements in the musical discourse for convincing the audience). Although the connections between words and music are difficult to separate, nevertheless lay works will exist and will be adapted for taking over a new text, this time a religious one, and this method is called *contrafactum*. Combining a sacred text with music already carrying a lay text is a sophisticated transforming process for several reasons. A change in the purpose for which a work was composed, especially from a laity focus area to the sacred one, affects a whole range of hermeneutical factors. The *contrafactum* method is used on a large scale by composers who wanted to benefit from the popularity of certain songs in order to adapt them musically (melodically, rhythmically, metrically, prosodically, harmonically, orchestrally or semantically). Sometimes, this resulted into masterpieces of a religious depth difficult to equal. Composers such as Johann Sebastian Bach succeeded in processing certain simple songs, not only by assigning them a sacred text, but by using a rich system of rhetorical musical methods.

Certain tragic events in the life of Fr. Poulenc, the premature loss of some close friends, made him turn towards church music. He started to be filled with a religious feeling, thus writing many works with a Biblical text. Of course, these could not be completely separated from certain skills from the first stage of his works which corresponded to the aesthetic of the groups of les Six. Thus, the combination between the music composed especially for a religious text and profane elements that will 'spice' music give birth to a mirroring of the dualism specific to the composer that the musicologist Claude Rostand would call 'a monk and a thug' (*moine ou voyou*), an expression that became famous for the characterisation of the French composer.

Coeval research cannot ignore the analysis of the evolution of vocal genres from their appearance until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, hybrid subgenres will appear, associated with an exclusively profane music (pop oratorio, rock oratorio, blues cantata, requiems that have almost nothing in common with the classical patterns, clearly becoming lay requiems). The phenomenon of the Christian rock, pop, hip-hop, or metal music will develop in parallel both in Europe and in North and South America, in the Protestant, Neo-protestant music, but also in the Roman-Catholic space, mainly in the countries in South America.

### 3. Conclusion

A tight connection can be made between the lack of education and the existence of these subgenres in the Neo-protestant churches. We are concerned with the low interest for stylistic coherence, requirements being more and more reduced regarding the manner of interpretation of vocal or instrumental music within religious services. The choir, as an instrument of the religious service for so many centuries, loses more and more ground, in favour of vocal groups, soloists, and accompanists. Nevertheless, if we note the existence of the choir in Neo-protestant churches, its repertoire is of doubtful taste because of amateur conductors, without sound musical training. Where there is a significant potential through exceptional voices, very good accompanists, conductors with theoretical musical knowledge, usually the next step in a complete training is missing: musical taste. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is one of extremes, of multiculturalism, of political correctness, and of compromise. In this context, a conservative approach is seen as retrograde, in the way of cultural progress. The subject addressed is a sensitive one, so that we will try to seize possible nuances in order to have a wider perspective.

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